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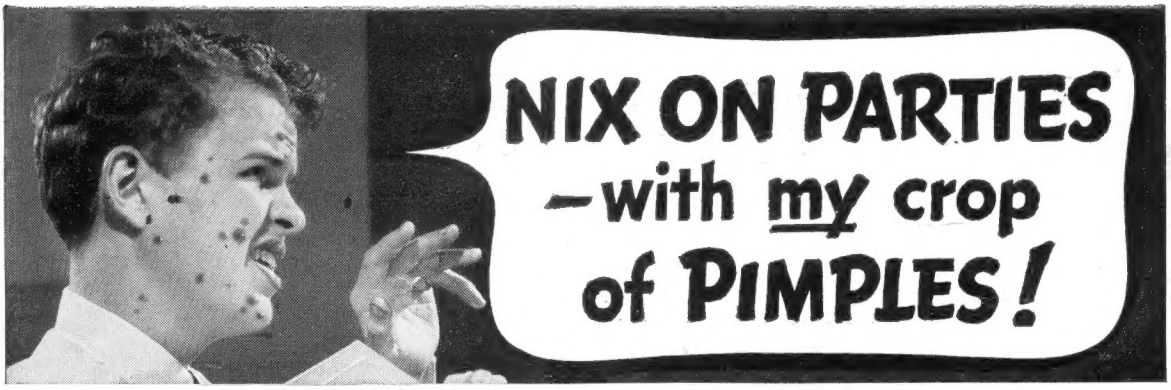
2 BIG NOVELS

THE MASSACRE IN DOLORES PASS

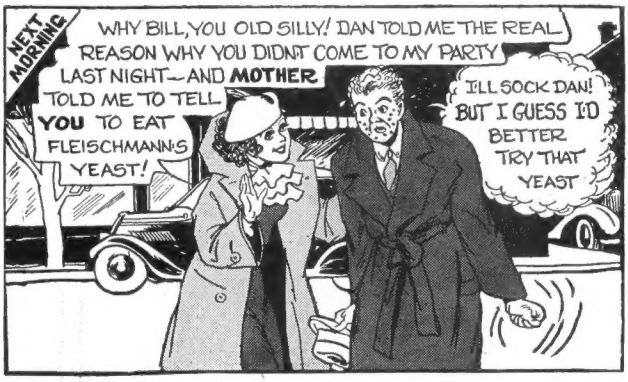
by RAY NAFZIGER

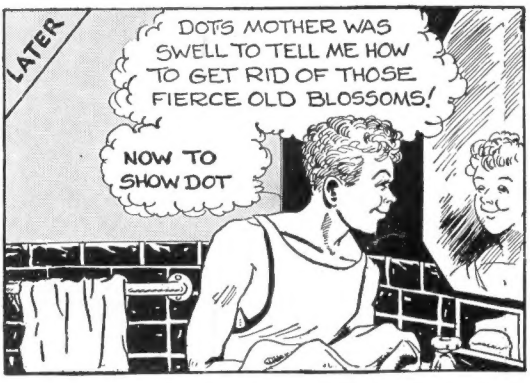
FIGHTING DONS OF SAN SABA

by T.T. FLYNN



BUT THERE IS HOPE FOR BILL


NEXT MORNING
WHY BILL, YOU OLD SILLY! DAN TOLD ME THE REAL REASON WHY YOU DIDN'T COME TO MY PARTY LAST NIGHT—AND MOTHER TOLD ME TO TELL YOU TO EAT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST!
I'LL SOCK DAN! BUT I GUESS I'D BETTER TRY THAT YEAST



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—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

Don't let Adolescent Pimples kill YOUR dates

DURING THE YEARS following the beginning of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer—many young people have to fight pimples.

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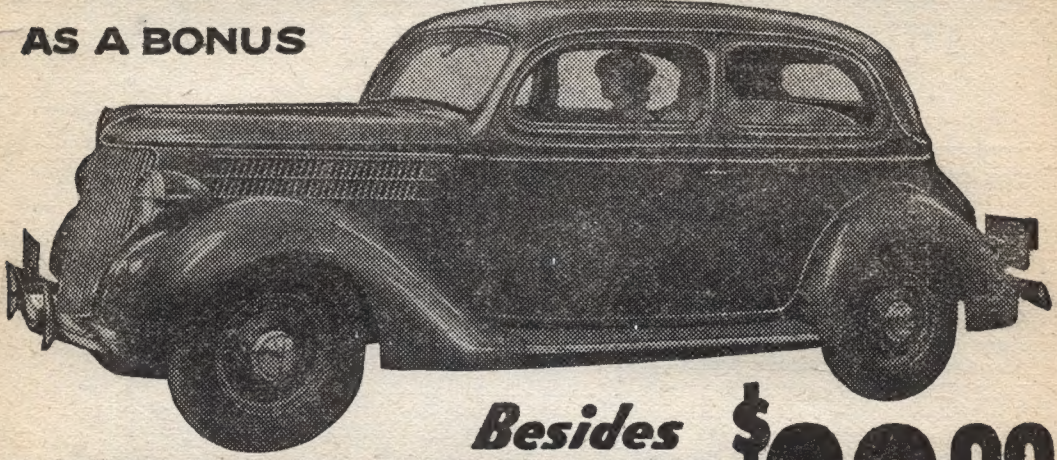
I'll Give You THIS BIG POWERFUL FORD TUDOR SEDAN

AS A BONUS



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STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME EIGHT APRIL, 1936 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ Two Big Star Novels ★ ★

THE MASSACRE AT DOLORES PASS ..... By Ray Nafziger 10

The lone survivor of the proud Rawson clan, he lived to carry the coward brand from that scene of blood and honor. Lonely and bitter, he rode on toward another gunsmoke test, to face death above the sunken graves of his fighting kinsmen!

FIGHTING DONS OF SAN SABA ..... By T. T. Flynn 78

Don Mike O'Grady, gringo cousin of the haughty Dons of San Saba, set out alone to win back the rangeland empire those firebrand relatives had stolen from him—and to carry back with him their most beautiful señorita!

★ ★ ★ Star Novelettes ★ ★ ★

HELL'S DRIFT FENCE ..... By William F. Bragg 50

What were bullet odds or a posse on his back-trail to Brazos Red, renegade, when a hard-pressed old cowman needed the two-fisted fighting strength that only Red cold give?

TINHORN'S LAST GAMBLE ..... By Luke Short 122

Black Jack Binney, cheap tinhorn, found himself holding cards in a poker game with murder and blackmail in the deck and a girl's life in the pot—and the chance, for once in his twisted life, to do something big for somebody else!

STAGECOACH PIONEER ..... By Robert E. Mahaffay 140

Trail wolves, Indian raiders, or hired killers could not keep young Jim Carlyon from pushing his stage line ever Westward—risking his all for those who would follow along the trail he blazed. . . .

★ ★ ★ Star Short Stories ★ ★ ★

DEACON BOTTLE—LYNCH BAIT ..... By Robert E. Mahaffay 40

Deacon Bottle proves himself a friend in need—and bait for a howling lynch-mob as well!

GUNS OF THE STORM ..... By Foster-Harris 68

Could any real man, like Wes Devlin, let even an enemy die in that blazing death-trap?

GUERILLA RENDEZVOUS ..... By W. Ryerson Johnson 112

Jeff Menard found that pretty señoritas below the Brimstone Border often lead to a boothill grave!

★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

STAR WESTERN ARTISTS ..... The Editor 4

The men whose pictures give us the flavor of the old frontier!

HAPPINESS DELAYED ..... The Maverick 8

That sheriff waited forty years—to greet the man they said he'd killed!

UP THE TRAIL ..... A Department 157

Cover Painting by Walter Baumhofer

Story Illustrations by Don Hewitt and Hamilton Greene

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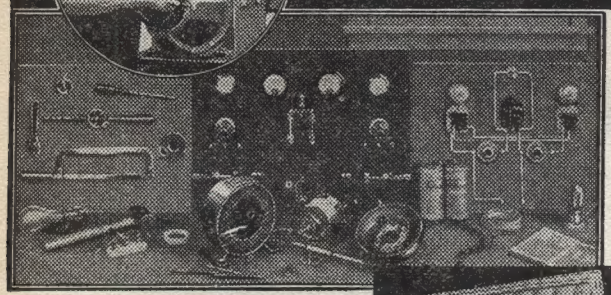

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Other symptoms of weak kidneys and irritated bladder are backache, puffy eyes, leg cramps, moist palms, burning or scanty passage.

(Continued from page 4)

thest-to-the-left horse in the picture for "Stagecoach Pioneer." He had to see many horses in action to get down the movement of that one so accurately.

Our artists are about the hardest working men of all those who help put *Star Western* on the stands. Unlike the authors, they can't get lazy now and then and let the editor fix up their work. They have to draw their picture, and draw it right, from the start. That's why we stick so closely to three or four men—and why we are always in search of some new artist who is willing to go through the stiff apprenticeship to "make" *Star Western*. We can give these beginners a picture only at very rare intervals until they prove themselves—because we feel that we owe a great deal of *Star Western's* success to our artists—and we want our readers to have only the authentic and the best!

THE EDITOR.

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5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
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HAPPINESS DELAYED

AS SHERIFF JOE MARNER grew grayer, older, he rode more and more often out to that little valley just south of Peaceful Town. It was a good eight-mile ride, and he usually started in time to reach the place by sunset. Very likely he couldn't have told you why, for the memory pictures that drew him to that place were always set in the nighttime. Yet, somehow, the red sky drew him. . . .

He would ride along the weedy trail, around the foot of the great bluffs and into the green little valley. A stream, always full of clear water, ran through the basin, curving in a gentle sweep around a little knoll almost in the middle. In the top of the rise was an irregularly rectangular hole that was lined in places with stones and in other places caved in. Once this had been the cellar of a house; but the charred timbers that had filled the cellar had turned to earth again and formed the footing for trees and brush that grew higher than a man on horseback. About the only sign left of that terrible fire of forty years ago was the three huge cottonwoods that stood in front of the little house. They were gnarled and twisted, scarred on one side. But the side away from the house still grew luxuriantly, silent memories of the great trees they once had been. . . .

Sheriff Joe would stop there beside the rotting cellar. In his memory he would rebuild the little white house that had once boasted of hollyhocks and honeysuckle, that had been filled with the voices of men and women, and the shrill yells of kids playing Cowboy an' Injun. He could see the rose bushes that had now grown wild across the one-time neat little garden that had been planted and tended by a yellow-haired girl.

The sun would set while Sheriff Joe watched. It would send its crimson and yellow streamers up from the hills to the blue zenith above him. It would fill him with a strange terror and send other pictures kaleidoscoping through his mind. Pictures of a gunfight in Peaceful Town . . . of tears flowing down the cheeks of a blue-eyed girl . . . pictures of men riding, grimly fighting out to the last ditch a bitter range war that had begun on such minor grounds. Sheriff Joe had been the deputy then of Peaceful County. He could have stopped that war—if he'd known how. . . .

And now, forty years later, he saw the red in the sky, the blood red that he had raced so hard to beat. Down around the butte he had come, into the valley, to a rearing stop in front of that blazing house. His guns were up, flaming. Not shooting at the folks who were running from the house; but driving back those who had beseiged them; his cousins and uncle, his father and brothers. . . .

The deputy sheriff had arrived too late! But his "timed" arrival made him sheriff later on—and it sent a whole family into exile. . . .

The sun sank while Sheriff Joe stood there looking at the ruins of his life. The crimson faded into black. The memories died in despair. "God!" It was a prayer and a castigation. "I *tried* to get there in time!"

A voice came softly through the night behind him. He had been too busy with his thoughts to hear the rider who had followed him into the valley. He hadn't realized that all day he had been trailed. He was getting old, and not as alert as a sheriff should be.

"You swear to that!" the voice said. "Folks say, even now in Peaceful Town that you arrived late on purpose! Folks say that you sided with your family—not against them!"

Sheriff Joe wondered if that was an echo of his unspoken thoughts. Without even thinking that he was addressing anybody he made his answer. It was as if he spoke, as he had a moment before, in prayer.

"My horse picked up a stone. I didn't even know that they were coming to attack until I heard the guns. I didn't know that Hank Elear had come back to Peaceful Valley. . . ."

"You swear to that, Sheriff. . . ."

Suddenly the oldster realized that he was not only talking to his memories. With a speed that belied his age he swung on his heels, and his two guns came up in his gnarled old hands. A soft laugh greeted his draw, and two other guns glinted in the starlight.

"I thought so," the voice said. "You're still hunting for Hank Elear—you still call the killing of your cousin Charlie murder. You Marners never were ready to give Hank a break."

The Sheriff still held his guns pointed for the other man. He had regained his old composure now. "My cousin Charlie was a yellow-bellied coward. Every Marner in the lot would have admitted it if it wasn't that they were fighting the Elears over some strayed cows. Charlie likely had a gun in Hank's back before Hank ever thought of drawing. If Hank hadn't got burned up when this house went I would of told him myself, an' begged his pardon!" The sheriff's eyes blazed, his words came short, clipped. "Now, stranger, who in hell are you?"

The stranger laughed again, pouched his guns. Deliberately he took out a match and snapped it with his thumb. He held the blazing taper, cupped in his hand, before his face. It flickered there, showing a gray-bearded chin, dark eyes with heavy wrinkles at the corners, and bushy eyebrows. Sheriff Joe thought there was something familiar to this man.

"You one of the Elears?" he asked. "You look kinda like the old man."

"Me," the man said, and the match glowed out, "I'm Hank. I wasn't burned up in that house. That was just a song an' dance Nancy gave you. She figgered you'd give up chasin' us around after you'd jumped our range an' thought you'd killed me."

Hank's sister, Nancy, would do something just like that, Nancy with her dark eyes and yellow hair and quick wit. For forty years the sheriff had thought that this man with whom he had once played Cowboy an' Injun, was dead. Yet, somehow, there was not much shock to finding him alive.

"You believe me, Hank?"

"Hell," Hank said. "I always have . . . I had to, despite what seemed to be the facts. Nancy wouldn't let me believe otherwise."

"She go with you?" the sheriff asked eagerly. "What come of her, Hank? She marry an' get a flock of kids? Or what in hell?"

Hank Elear's hand reached out and took the sheriff's. They clasped for a long moment there in the darkness beside the ruins of their lives. Then the man who was supposed to have been dead, told the man who was supposed to have caused his death, what had happened. Hank and Nancy had wandered; they had finally settled in Idaho. Now they were old. They had lost their ranch, and since neither had married they had no children to care for them. Hank had come down to see the valley once again. Nancy had sent a note to the sheriff which Hank now gave him. It read simply: "Please forgive us as we have forgiven you." It was signed "Nancy—"

"She wondered what had come of the old place," Hank said. "She wanted me to find out who was running it—if they was carin' for her roses after all these years. . . ."

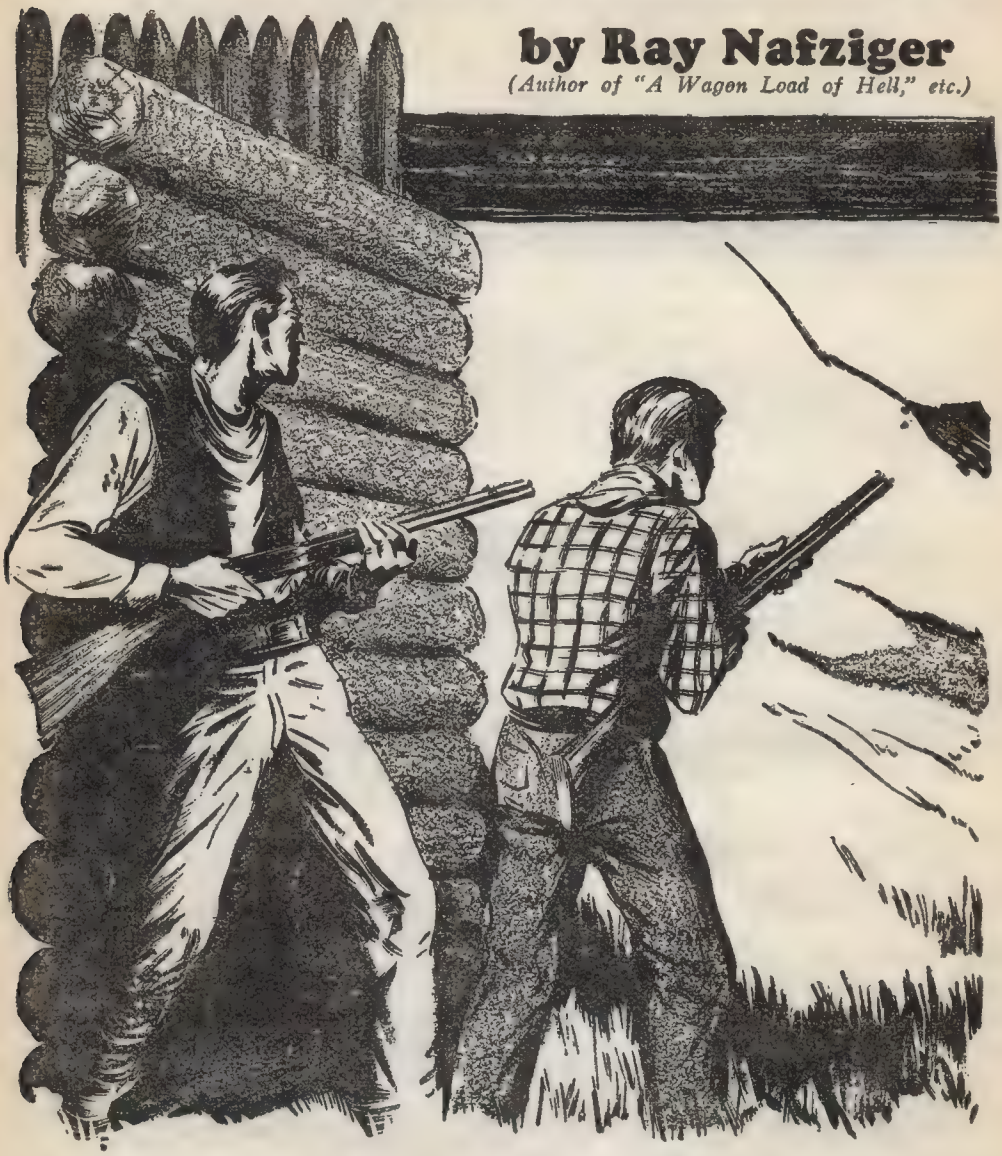
"The roses are growin' sort of wild," the old sheriff told him. "But the place is still yores an' Nancy's. Somebody's been payin' the taxes. An' somebody paid off the mortgage. Nobody seems to know who."

"Nobody knows, huh?" Again Hank Elear clasped the sheriff's hand. "I wonder who it could be?"

The sheriff shrugged. But later, when Hank rode north to bring Nancy back to the spread where he and Joe Marner planned to start out again with Nancy as mistress of the spread, he spoke in a husky old voice to his crow-bait horse. "Lightnin'," he said. "We come all this way to kill that son. An' he's been holdin' this ranch for forty years for Nancy to come back to. Lightnin', we all made a mistake. . . ."

THE MASSACRE AT

by Ray Nafziger
(Author of "A Wagon Load of Hell," etc.)



A DRUM of hoofs raised Blake Rawson from inspecting the Dutch ovens in the corner fireplace. The one room of the old abandoned stage station in Dolores Pass, with rifle slits instead of windows, was dark. The small, high-walled corral was slitted also for rifles and closed by a log gate that no ram could batter down.

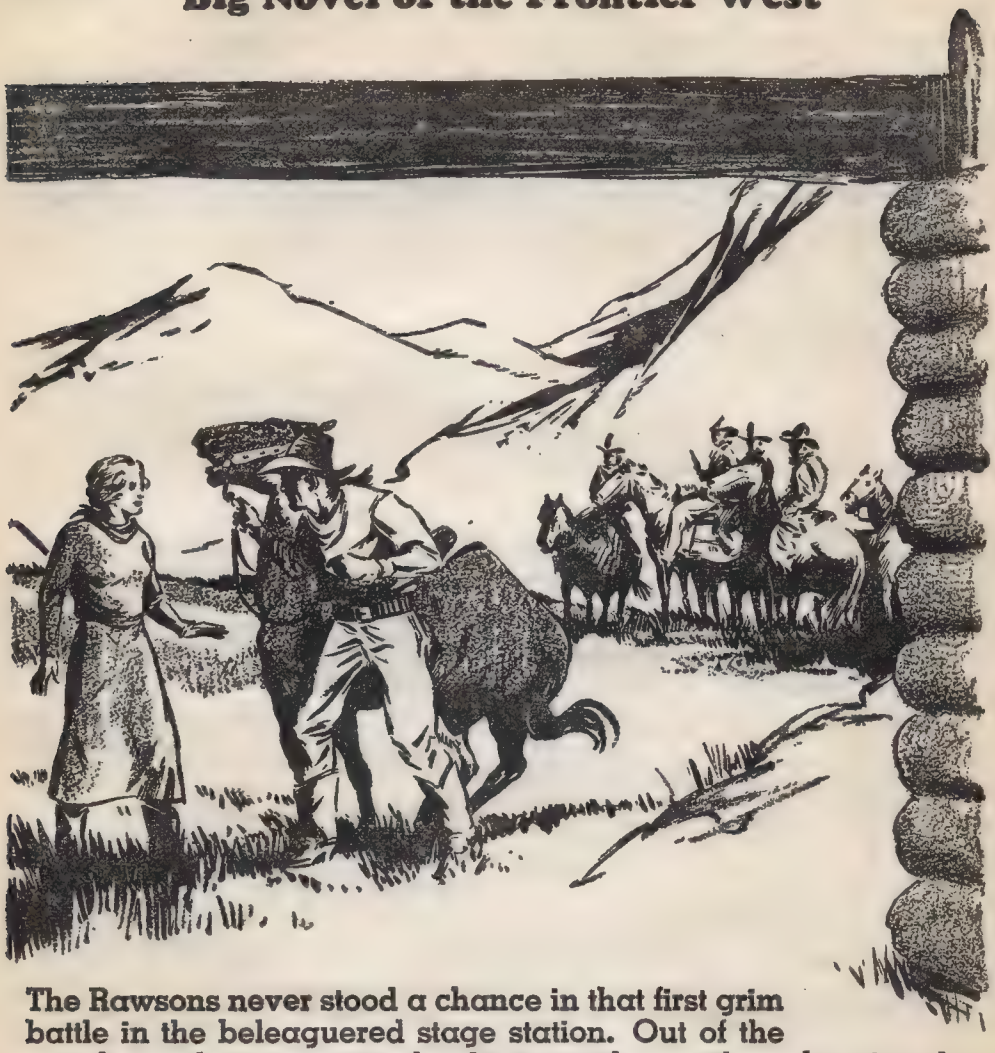
The oncoming rider dashed through the open gate into the corral. It was Burt Cullinan, dark, handsome, a distant relative of Blake Rawson.

"Over seventy-five of 'em, Blake," Cullinan reported. "Toughs and two-gun men. Camped for chuck six miles below. They'll be here in the Pass by night. Better get out quick, while yuh can."

Nine men were here at the stage station waiting with Blake Rawson. Five of them sat on the ground playing poker on an old, worn buffalo robe while the rest

DOLORES PASS

Big Novel of the Frontier West



The Rawsons never stood a chance in that first grim battle in the beleaguered stage station. Out of the powdersmoke came nine dead men and one other—bearing the coward's brand. Alone and bitter, he wandered the West, selling his guns to the law—marching, all unsuspecting, toward the second battle, and the second massacre, at Dolores Pass!

watched. The three older men of the nine were Blake's brothers. One was his son, Dick, seventeen. The other five were Rawsons also, either by blood or by marriage, young fellows mostly. One of these, with long blond hair and pale blue eyes, had arrived only the day before from Texas.

Gaunt-faced Blake Dawson looked at them approvingly. They were fighting men, all of them, as the Rawsons always had been.

"You heard what Burt said," Blake addressed them in his deep voice. "Seventy-five gunmen. We can either run or fight. If we run, that renegade army of Ab Gregg's will pour into the valley, burn

our houses, shoot down our cattle—and us. They won't give a damn what they hit—women and children or cattle. Ab Gregg will let 'em go as far as they like. Colonel Moran maybe will send soldiers, maybe not. We can hold 'em up here in the Pass—maybe a few hours, maybe a few days. We'll all be killed, but we'll take a bunch of the devils to hell with us. Maybe we'll even discourage the rest or hold 'em till the soldiers come. Run or fight—it's up to us."

His deep voice fell. "Boys, some years ago a bunch of Texans could have run. At the Alamo, that was, with Santa Anna's Mexicans marching up with twenty times as many men. Those Texans drew a line; told those that wanted to stay to cross it. They all crossed it: they all stayed. Two of our relatives were in that battle. The Mexicans killed 'em all there at the Alamo, but it gave General Houston time to gather the army that wiped out Santa Anna and set up the Republic of Texas. No use drawing any line here. Those of you that want can stay; those that don't can get their horses now and ride out."

NO one said a word. The poker players who had stopped to listen looked down at their cards, quietly made their bets. One of the onlookers began oiling a gun. Fire gleamed in Blake Rawson's eyes.

"You—you mean—you're all stayin' here?" Cullinan burst out. "They'll wipe yuh out. Don't be crazy."

"No one asks you to stay, Burt," cut in Blake.

"No-o," said Cullinan hesitantly, "but of course, I'll throw in with yuh. Only after they surround you—us, I mean—there'll be no chance of our gittin' out. You men—uh—us, that is—will all be butchered."

"Yeah," admitted Blake Rawson. "That's about it, Burt." He turned to his seventeen-year old son. "Dick, this is a man's affair. Get your horse and fog it."

Dick Rawson frowned at his cards. "I'll fight anybody who says I don't qualify as a man," he returned.

Blake nodded. He had known that Dick would stay, and from him he turned to the young Texan cousin who had arrived only that morning. Whelan Rawson had ridden over to visit Martha McCrae, a Rawson on her mother's side. Black-haired, blue-eyed, the girl was a beauty worth riding from Texas to see. She and Whelan had been engaged before the girl left Texas.

"You're a stranger here, Whelan," said Blake. "No call for you to stay. You never heard of this trouble of ours with Ab Gregg."

The blond young Texan grinned. "I can't see," he said, "where that bars me." He squinted at his cards. "I'll open," and flung a couple of dollars down on the robe.

"Once that gunman army come into the Pass, there'll be no getting out, no leaving," argued Blake. "Now's the time to go. This is no fight of yours, Whelan. Martha has been waiting to see you."

They all watched Whelan Rawson out of the corner of their eyes. He looked a fighter. They had liked him at first sight. He had the high cheek bones, the light, rather prominent eyes of all the Rawsons.

"You talk almost as if you didn't want me," Whelan Rawson complained, grinning. "I'm raisin' 'er the limit." A handful of dollars clinked down on the robe.

Burt Cullinan eyed them. "Look here, if you're all in for it, I'm with you, of course, like I said. You got that pack load of ammunition waitin' down at your place, Blake. No use for any of you to catch up a horse to ride for it. I'll go on down and hustle it back. The eleven of

us ought to be able to hold 'em off."

"We can hold 'em off for a while," said Blake Rawson.

Cullinan's hand came out, and in some surprise Blake took it. The Rawsons were not a family who made show of their feelings.

"This bein' the devil's deal, I'll take a hand," declared Cullinan with a laugh, somewhat high-pitched, forced. "I'll be back in two hours at the latest—with those cartridges."

HIS horse drummed away north, through the rocky walls of the Pass and out into Dolores Valley. The rest waited. Waiting for death at the old stage station. Joking, playing poker, hooraw-ing Blake who was cooking for them in the corner fireplace. Whelan Rawson from Texas was winning steadily at poker. The Englishman, Warington, a remittance man, big, ruddy-cheeked, who had married Blake Rawson's sister, puffed on a big-bowled pipe and swore genially at himself for trying to beat Americans at poker. Jug Rawson, the only one of the Rawsons who could be called fat, plunked a guitar and sang Mexican songs.

Toward evening seventeen-year-old Dick, watching on the stage station roof, reported a dust cloud below the Pass. The gunman army was closing in. Burt Cullinan should have been back with those extra cartridges, but he still had plenty of time to make it. Blake cursed softly; he had never trusted Cullinan whole-heartedly.

Blake thought of his wife and three young children back in the valley. His married brothers thought of their families: the rest thought of mothers and sweethearts. Young Whelan Rawson was thinking of the girl he had ridden from Texas to see. He wished he'd had time to have talked to her, to see her if only for a moment.

Blake on the roof strained his eyes toward the north, hoping for sight of Cullinan and the cartridges, debating sending out a man on the one horse they were keeping in the small corral. But surely Cullinan wouldn't throw them down; if he'd been delayed, he'd come in under cover of darkness.

A hail came out of the dusk, the hard voice of Ab Gregg who lusted for Dolores Valley so much that he and his son would lead a gunman army wading through the blood of women and children to get it.

"You men can't stop us; give up before we wipe you out," he called. "I got enough men here to brush you outa the way in ten minutes, and once she starts, I ain't stoppin' until every one of you is buzzard meat. What's your final word, Blake?"

"You go to hell, Ab Gregg."

Gregg dropped back to prepare for the attack, while in the stage station the ten men waited.

The first shots came with the first pelting drops of the rain. Guns thundered against the adobe walls until it seemed as if the sound alone could knock them down. And Gregg's desperadoes pushed up under cover of darkness and rain, clambering along the rock walls of the Pass where they could fire down from above.

From the roof of the station, from the room below, and from the corral the Rawsons replied, keeping the snarling guns at bay. Smashing back abortive rushes, using up precious cartridges. Whelan Rawson suggested a counter-attack in the little arroyo. Leading it, crawling through the rain and mud, his party fell on a dozen Gregg gunmen suddenly, and sent them in a wild flight, leaving behind the bodies of dead and wounded men. Half a dozen of the enemy were put out of action in that daring raid.

"He'll do," said Blake Rawson to himself, thinking of Whelan. In the lull of the battle he took an old ledger from a saddlebag and a pencil. By the fire he wrote, setting down a record of the battle for the families of these men. *"Whelan Rawson,"* he wrote in his account of the raid, *"is the best fighting man I ever saw, bar none."*

Blake Rawson had been educated for a lawyer, but had liked the outdoor life better than the wrangling of courtrooms. Now writing rapidly, he jotted down notes of the course of the fight, leaving a record to be read later by children still in their mother's arms. Some day they would see these pages, the history of the passing of fathers and brothers who had died for them, of men fighting desperately, hoarding their dwindling ammunition, answering the savage thrusts of overwhelming numbers with a terrible ferocity. Counting cartridges, cursing Burt Cullinan, who had promised to bring back that pack mule with cartridges and had failed them.

The remittance man, Warington, filled his pipe from a round tin of English tobacco and smoked phlegmatically as he watched at a rifle slit. He had been exiled from England by his family and had found a life to his liking in the West. He had often been joked about that fancy tobacco which he ordered direct from London.

GUNS blasted away unceasingly outside. Powder smoke clogged the air of the station. The Englishman, filling his pipe again, looked sadly at the few flakes of tobacco in the round tin and, debating whether to save a little for another pipe, chuckled grimly. Maybe he'd never live to enjoy another pipe. He filled the bowl, flung the tin by the fireplace where Blake Rawson was snatching a few seconds to continue his account. And a moment later he went down with a bullet in the back of his head. He never made a sound. When they picked him up, the pipe stem was still clenched tightly between his teeth.

Not ten minutes later, Whelan bore in Dick, the seventeen-year-old son of Blake. Blood was spreading over the boy's shirt front. A round stick of pine that one of his uncles had been whittling before the battle lay on the floor.

"Put it between my teeth," ordered Dick and clamped tight on the stick in order to keep back the agonizing pain that flamed in his body. Blake Bent over his son, seeing with despair that the boy was dying. Silently, while sweat beaded his face, Dick looked up at his father.

The men at the adobe-walled Alamo had lasted five hours. These ten behind the old stage station had already fought for seven. At midnight six were left, but of these Jug Rawson, badly hurt, was demanding that he be placed in a rope swing so that he could use a rifle.

Young Dick Rawson went out at midnight. Seeing it was near, Blake took him in his arms. "Son," he muttered, "I'll soon be riding with you. Forgive your father, lad, for bringing you to this."

The pine stick bitten almost in two in the lad's agony fell to the floor and the boy smiled, then shuddered in Blake's arms, and was suddenly limp.

"Damn that Cullinan," whispered Blake as he released the boy. "He didn't come back. Somebody's got to go out and get cartridges."

He looked about the darkened room. The heavy thunder of guns had stopped momentarily; there was a steady roar of the rain.

"We got to have cartridges," Blake announced. "But there's no chance of getting through. If anyone tried, it would be only a choice between dying in here or dying out there."

"I'll go," offered Whelan Rawson. "Ride south until I'm out of the Pass and take that arroyo to the canyon bottom."

"It means heading straight into their camp. It's no chance at all, but if anyone can make it son, you can. Better wait; the soldiers might come."

"Open the gate for me," said Whelan.

Whelan Rawson left his rifle, took only his six-shooter with the cartridges in it. Then he was out in the corral and up on the wet back of his horse, riding bareback for sake of greater speed. The gate creaked open, and then he was spurring into the Pass and into what seemed to him a solid sheet of gun fire. His horse hammered the road in a desperate drumming. Out of the rocky walls, he turned the horse straight down the steep slope of the arroyo.

As his horse lunged down a path that was dangerous to ride in daylight, the guns behind him slashed the night with crimson flames. A shot in his back that sent fire through his whole body made Whelan half slip from the back of the horse. Then his mount went down, and Whelan was thrown heavily in the wet brush. Bullets cut about him. One struck his thigh. Painfully Whelan began to crawl until he reached the muddy stream in the canyon bottom. Along it he made a slow, determined progress. He had to bring back cartridges. Somewhere downstream lay Blake Rawson's ranch and a pack load of ammunition. . . .

FAILURE to find the rider was enough to make Ab Gregg lead a savage assault which carried his men over the corral walls. They thrust their guns through the rifle slits of the station to fire into the room.

Reduced to three men, including himself, Blake realized that they were done for. While blood from an arm wound dripped on the paper, he wrote the last words, stating simply that the end was close, their cartridges down to half a dozen. He tore out the pages from the ledger, and hunted in the darkness for some place to put them. A foot stumbled against the round tobacco tin of the Englishman, Warington. Blake stuffed the sheets in the can, closed the lid, and considered the safest place to deposit it. Striding across the room, he put the tin under the cold hands that were folded over the breast of his son.

The door bent in; suddenly crashed. Blake's brother, Blythe, emptied his six-shooter and fell forward dead, as mud-spattered figures came in, Ab Gregg leading, guns spurting fire. Shots cut the room, and Blake with the remaining man, Sam Rawson, fell together. Blake's gun was empty.

Sam Rawson, unable to lift his gun, shoved it against Blake's side. "One shot —left—" he gasped. "The last."

"The last—" Blake Rawson was thinking, as feebly he raised the gun to fire at the men who were almost over him.

At the shot Ab Gregg gave a curse and reeled back, while six-shooters and rifles of the others riddled Blake and Sam Rawson with lead, and turned to spray the bodies of the other dead men, making them jump in a mock imitation of life.

Under the lead hail, the body of young Dick Rawson rolled in the bunk, and the round tobacco can fell from under the boy's hands to the floor.

Then the room of the dead was silent, while men, pushing in through the thick powder smoke, rebuilt the fire and by its light stared at their fallen enemies. Crowding into the room, they began to yell exultantly. They had won: Dolores Valley lay open.

Outside there was the muffled clop of many hoofs up the road into the Pass, and the clink and rattle of accoutrements. The soldiers had come. Ab Gregg had laughed

at the idea that the army might interfere, but now Ab was past laughing, with a bullet lodged in his brain after tearing up through his mouth. Gregg's gunmen, leaving the nine dead men in the station, took Ab's body with them in flight.

The dead men had won, had saved the valley from massacre and torch. They had fought to the last man, and the tale of that epic battle would never die. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Coward Brand

THE rain was still falling when Whelan Rawson dragged himself from under the poor shelter of an earth bank to the nearest pool of water. He drank, then removed the filthy bandage from his leg and bathed the swollen flesh. He had not attempted to take care of the wound in his back. Miraculously it was causing him little trouble.

So far had he crawled from Dolores Pass that the little troop of soldiers who chanced to ride along the canyon and find the delirious man never connected him with the Dolores Pass fight. They said he was some cussed prospector probably, shot by his own gun in an accident. But that wasn't it either: one bullet was in the back. And the old jasper was handing out queer talk—raving about cartridges, begging for cartridges.

"Sure, we'll get you cartridges, old-timer," laughed the sergeant. "We'll take you down to the fort where we got a lot of 'em. Here, play with these." The non-com took several from a pocket and then stared as the bearded man clutched eagerly at them.

"I'll be damned," said the sergeant suddenly. "Shave off that beard and he'd be as young as any of us."

They loaded him on a mule, with two soldiers holding him in the saddle, and moved him across the mountain. At the first ranch he was transferred to a rig.

When Whelan Rawson came to, long days later, he stared at the white-washed walls of the Fort hospital and the white beds, weakly wondering where he was and how he had come there.

When his mind had cleared he realized there was a funeral outside, not just of one person, but of a number. From his bed he could see the fort cemetery and a long procession of civilians and soldiers, following a line of flag-covered coffins carried on heavy wagons. He counted them. Nine.

"I'd rather be in their boots than in that of the yellow dog that run away," said one orderly to another. "Them was men! Nine that all but licked seventy-five."

Whelan raised on an elbow. He realized that this was the funeral of the Rawsons, probably a second one. Blake and two of his brothers had once been in the army, and the others had been considered deserving a soldier's funeral, so that all nine had been brought here to be laid together in a soldier's cemetery.

The volleys rang out over the row of graves and people began streaming back. Whelan saw Martha McCrae among the women, bare-headed, her dark hair glossy, her eyes filled with tears. The tears of women would be a deathless sepulchre for Blake Rawson, his son and brothers, the Englishman, and the rest. In their hearts and their children's and in the words of strangers there would be everlasting life for the heroic men of Dolores Pass.

But Whelan Rawson's name would be written in black letters of disgrace. He could explain that he had been sent out for ammunition, the cartridges Cullinan should have brought, but no one would believe him.

HE questioned the orderlies a little. Burt Cullinan had told a story to defend himself; saying nothing about his

promise to go for ammunition. It was from Burt that they had learned ten men should have been there at the station.

Silently Rawson cursed Cullinan who had told a lie to cover his own cowardice, condemning Whelan Rawson to the fate of being known as the man who had run away, deserting his kinsmen, afraid to face what a seventeen-year-old boy had met calmly. Unknown here in the hospital, it was easier to give a false name, letting people think that Whelan Rawson had escaped scot-free. Whelan turned his face to the wall. News of his cowardice would flash back to Texas, to his family and friends there. And as for Martha McCrae, there was no further use in thinking of her. She wasn't the kind to forgive a coward.

The Rawsons, he learned later, were leaving the Dolores Valley, since the families were unable to handle its extensive range. A committee of a governor and two army officers, moved by the heroism of the nine, had undertaken to sell the valley for enough to put the families beyond material needs.

Rawson, when he was able to sit a saddle, bought a horse and rode west for many days, landing finally in California. He changed his last name to his first, Whelan. He gambled for a while in San Francisco, then drifted.

He was a man that people said had no emotions. He never laughed; was never even seen to smile. He played life as he played poker, behind a mask which he never lifted; with the cold precision of a machine. He became known as a man it did not pay to cross. He left a dead gambler in Tonopah, another in Tucson, and at a road ranch in Utah he left three would-be bandits. All this was bound to bring him renown as a gunman, and a town which had buried five marshals offered him the job.

He hesitated before he took it, but once in it something sprang to life in him. They called him a coward back in Dolores Valley; as Marshal Whelan he took a savage pleasure in showing that they had lied. In three days he sent three men to Boot Hill, all owners of notched guns. He cleaned up, to the extent that the crooks and tinhorns were sent running, but when hypocrites wanted to make the town into a sanctimonious little Heaven, he flung his badge in their faces and went back to gambling.

He didn't stay long. A trail town, Algodones, called him in a hurry—and there was another exodus of bad men to the cemeteries and more distant regions. He had found his work, and he dealt the law impartially and, despite his killings, justly.

Again he resigned, but by now the yellow-haired Marshal Whelan had a name that he couldn't quit. Although he had never fired his guns except for the law, people began to call him a killer.

In time came a few scars. A bullet twisted one side of his face slightly, giving him a different expression, adding many years to his age.

As the years passed, he succeeded in walling away the Dolores Pass fight, putting it out of his mind until it was brought up in talk, as it often was, in yarns of epic battles told in cow camps and mining towns. They never forgot the one man who had turned tail and run, deserting his kinsmen. During one telling, there was a sharp click in the circle of listeners; the stem of the pipe Marshal Whelan had been smoking snapped off. They looked at him curiously when he got up and rode away.

The average man would have forgotten that disgrace in time, secure in his own knowledge of his courage, but not Whelan Rawson. Back in his family lay generations of courage, with never a blot. A black mark on the courage of a Rawson. . .

HE was back on his ranch, with the Dolores Pass battle fifteen years behind him, when two men drove up one day in a buckboard. Both were tall, angular. Their dark clothes and white shirts reminded Whelan of church deacons. One said he was the mayor of a small town called Canaan; his name was Locker; his companion was Cassell. They were partners in a store. They came to Whelan because he had once made a name as deputy marshal.

A group of renegades had Canaan in its power, they declared, and no marshal had been able to tame the gang of tinhorn gamblers, ruffians and outlaws operating deadfalls to rob herders and cowboys. There were undoubtedly rewards for some of the men, the two suggested.

"Rewards don't interest me," stated Rawson.

"That's up to you, of course," said Locker smoothly. "We represent the decent element, and we want a man to make Canaan decent. We'll pay big, and we'll give you two men to help."

"I don't want any help," said Rawson. "I'll handle it in my own way, and I reserve the right to quit if I find the men that hire me stack up as crooked as the men they want me to wipe out."

Whelan saddled and followed the pair in their buckboard over mountains and across valleys, camping with them each night. They were traveling over new country to him, and he paid scant heed to directions. The last night of their trip they kept on traveling, reaching Canaan at midnight. On the edge of a plain, it looked cold, bleak, a cluster of little frame houses with many windmills. Riding down the dark main street, Whelan pretty well sized up the sort of town it was; he knew its gambler and saloon man types, and the old harridans who ran the places where women sold themselves. Mayor Locker and his partner put Whelan up at a ramshackle hotel.

When he got up in the morning and went out to hunt breakfast, Whelan stopped in his tracks, staring unbelievingly at the mountain range to the west.

If it had been fifty instead of fifteen years since he had seen it, he would have known that range, although he had last seen it from a point farther south—from Dolores Pass. This was not Canaan Valley: it was Dolores Valley—The valley of nine dead heroes and one live coward!

A long minute he stared, and then entered a barroom where an old fellow was swamping out.

"How long has this valley been called Canaan?" he asked hoarsely.

"'Bout fifteen years," said the swamper. "After the Rawsons left, it was sold to a religious outfit that started this town. 'Stead o' Dolores, they called town and valley Canaan, after the Canaan in the Bible, the land of flowing milk and honey. The religious outfit had a squabble, and the valley's gone back into private hands. But it's kept the new name."

Shakily Whelan took two rapid drinks, and looked out into the street. A woman was passing along the walk, accompanied by a boy of thirteen or so, whose arms dangled a little crookedly at his sides. She wore a shawl over her proudly-carried head, but Whelan Rawson knew her hair was glossy black; that she was Martha McCrae whom he had ridden from Texas to marry. And the boy by her side with the same easy walk and carriage of the head was undoubtedly her son.

"Two of the few Rawsons left here," the bartender volunteered. "Marthy Rawson McCrae she was before she married a rancher in here, name o' Thomas. He died way back leavin' her a ranch near Dolores Pass and that boy. Her ranch is just about gone; been sold for taxes. Tooken over by one of her kin, a feller

named Burt Cullinan. She lives here in town, scratching along somehow, hopin' to save her property. She could do it by marrying Burt Cullinan, but she'd ruther lose her ranch."

For the first time in many years Marshal Whelan was shaken out of his cold calm. He had another drink, needing it with Martha McCrae in the same town. Seeing her stirred him exactly as she had stirred him before he had tried to forget her.

"Come over and I'll swear you in," said Locker. "There's already a job for you. One of Burt Cullinan's gang killed a man last night over in Honest Tom Louderbaugh's place. Plain murder."

"One of Burt Cullinan's men, eh?" said Whelan slowly. He had forgotten Burt Cullinan, who had burned the coward brand on him. Cullinan who, so the swamper said, was stealing Martha McCrae's ranch. He could run away from meeting Martha McCrae, but not from Cullinan. Slowly his face set in the old mask. Some trick of fate had brought him here to the scene of his old disgrace; he determined suddenly to play the hand out.

HE went to the small shack which contained the mayor's office, with a volunteer fire department on one side, a small jail on the other. Canaan was not the county-seat: that was forty-five miles distant.

Mayor Locker swore in Whelan, and he put the marshal's badge on his vest. He was also a deputy sheriff; it was his duty to arrest the man from Cullinan's outfit who had killed the dealer the night before and take him to the county-seat. Whelan promptly yanked the killer out of his hotel room, and headed across country

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with him. That afternoon the sheriff was receipting for the prisoner.

"Look out that town of Canaan ain't your last stop, Whelan," he said, recognizing the famous marshal. "That valley has been splotched with blood ever since the Dolores Pass fight. Ever hear about that?"

"Yeah; I've heard of it," admitted Whelan grimly, and pocketing the receipt, rode to the hotel to put up for the night. The next day he returned to Canaan.

When he arrived at dusk most of the population of Canaan, knowing the fame of the new marshal, came out to watch him ride down the street. Dance-hall women, fearing that he might mean the end of their occupation, shrilled epithets at him.

Such hostility was not new to him; calmly he ate his supper and strolled around the town's establishments. Everywhere he went there were whispers. This was the famous Marshal Whelan, brought in to tame Canaan. Already he had dared to arrest one of Burt Cullinan's men, something no other officer had ventured to do.

It was while he was making his rounds that Whelan realized he was being followed, and turned in a little open space to confront the person. It was a youngster, and, startled, Whelan identified him as the son of Martha McCrae Thomas.

"What do you want?" he demanded gruffly.

"Nothin', Mister Marshal Whelan," said the boy. "Them guns of yours, you carry 'em purt' high, don'tcha? Figger it gives yuh more speed?"

"You run along," growled Whelan "Don't bother with what's none of your business."

But it troubled him, and all evening he wondered why the boy had been following him. Had his mother suspected that the new arrival was Whelan Rawson and sent the boy to spy on him?

In one of the saloons he ran into the swarthy Burt Cullinan. Cullinan had seen Whelan only once, when he had ridden up to Dolores Pass to report the gunman army was approaching. He did not recognize Whelan now. Still handsome, there were dissolute lines etched on his face.

"So you're the new marshal?" sneered Cullinan. "The town's luck to have such a famous yellow-haired 'Wild Bill' roddin' it. Maybe you'll need to be lucky, too."

For a moment Whelan felt a powerful urge to face Cullinan out about the old Dolores Pass fight, to state publicly that Cullinan had been the coward. He checked himself. That was all in the past he had been telling himself.

"I always have had all the luck I needed," said Whelan, and passed on.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost Station

CANAAN quieted down with the coming of the new marshal, indications, Whelan realized, of a coming storm. Cullinan's man whom Whelan had arrested and delivered to the sheriff was held for murder. Honest Tom Louderbaugh, sole witness of the shooting, prepared to testify that it had been cold-blooded murder. Bets were offered that the case would never come to trial.

The boy, Dick Thomas, in spite of Whelan's rebuffs, continued to shadow the marshal. He figured it out finally as a kind of hero worship, which was the last thing Whelan wanted from Martha McCrae's son. His trade was to enforce the law, to kill if necessary. A dirty job, but a useful one.

He sized up Cullinan's gang, found

them a tough lot of cowboys, desperadoes and outlaws. Two men among them who went by the names of Means and Bucks, he identified as members of an old Arizona bandit gang, with at least fifteen hundred dollars on their heads. Means, a big, rawboned half-breed, was range foreman for Cullinan; Bucks claimed to be trapping back in the mountains, but loafed away his days in the saloons.

Cassell and Mayor Locker were jubilant over the arrest of one of the Cullinan gang and fawned over the marshal for it. Canaan was on its way to being a law-abiding place, they declared.

In any other town Whelan would have been suspicious of the partners who dressed like church elders, but the fact that this was Dolores Valley, close to Dolores Pass, blunted his judgment. He could not forget that Whelan Rawson had died in that Pass, losing Martha McCrae and all contact with his people—all that he valued in the world. Several times he dodged running into the woman, fearing that her keen eyes would identify him.

A week, and a steady downpour of rain blotted the valley, the same sort of rain that had come the night when Blake Rawson and his kinsmen had held Dolores Pass. The darkness of the storm headed the marshal to an early supper in the Chinese restaurant. As he passed through the hotel bar, someone caught his sleeve, Dick Thomas, with his arms hanging a little crookedly, his prematurely-old face even more serious than usual.

"What the hell you wantin' now?" Whelan demanded roughly.

"Mister Marshal Whelan," said the boy, "they're afixin' to trap yuh. Goin' to put the kibosh on yuh—tonight. Them two, Cassell and Locker, they've made up with Cullinan an', both parties bein' afraid of yuh, they're gangin' now to get rid of yuh. Locker and Cassell brung yuh in as bluff—to force Cullinan to cut them in on the graft here. Cullinan come to terms, and they agreed to git rid of both you and Honest Tom Louderbaugh."

"What you handin' me?" Whelan growled. "Run along. You got business of your own. 'Tend to it. Go home."

The boy's face flushed angrily, but he left a final word. "I hate to see a man like you git whipsawed. I'm tellin' yuh, they're layin' for you and Louderbaugh. If you got any sense, you won't go down to Tom Louderbaugh's tonight when they send for yuh."

But an hour later when word came that Whelan was wanted at Louderbaugh's, he strode carelessly through the rain, his shoulders hunched against the downpour. Cassell and Locker had done nothing to make him suspect their motives. Honest Tom Louderbaugh was a close friend of the partners; that they would be joining Cullinan against Louderbaugh was unbelievable.

HE entered Louderbaugh's place, and saw no sign of disorder. Burt Cullinan and the outlaws, Means and Bucks, were in a poker game with Louderbaugh, sitting in a small side room with the door open. Four of Cullinan's riders were at one end of the bar shaking dice.

Whelan had a whiskey and noticed that Cullinan and his two outlaws had shifted position a little in the room. Honest Tom Louderbaugh, a beefy German, was drunk, and suddenly Cullinan spilled the cards to the floor and kicked back his chair. "Honest Tom, hell!" he bellowed at Louderbaugh. "Damn you, take those aces out of your sleeve."

Whelan took two strides toward the little room and then swung suddenly. The Cullinan riders at the end of the bar were getting into action, going for their guns. The kid had been right. It was a frame-up to get him and Louderbaugh. The four by the bar were to shoot him in the back

as he interfered in the quarrel in the little room.

Whelan's gun was whipping up from leather, and his left hand was fanning the hammer; at the short range he couldn't miss the men at the bar, even bucking the recoil. Firing as he stepped back out of range of the open doorway of the small room where the guns of Cullinan and Means and Bucks were finishing the drunken Louderbaugh, his first shot caught one man in the chest, sent him reeling back against the bar.

His second hit another who had fired a hurried, wild shot that whistled past Whelan's head. The other two men at the bar flung themselves behind it for shelter.

Whelan had a glimpse of the table in the little room and Louderbaugh slumped over it. Cullinan, Means and Bucks were out of sight. Louderbaugh was done for, past help, but the marshal sent blind shot angling into the little room. He guessed that the three had retreated through another door.

Behind him the sudden increased sound of the rain came, and he pivoted to face the front door. Mayor Locker and Cassell stood there, guns in their hands. The pair leaped back into the street without firing a shot. One of the men who had dived behind the bar edged out to take a shot at the marshal; it struck a rib, plowing partly around his body before lodging. Whelan's gun ripped out two shots at the man, sent the fellow rolling out on the sawdust of the floor, clutching his belly.

Slowly Whelan backed toward a side door. A bullet crashed into the door frame above him, but the man who had fired it wasn't in sight. His enemies were all under cover.

"Git him!" Mayor Locker was yelling from the street. "Cut him down."

Another shot, coming from above the incompleted partition of the small room, hit Whelan. His right arm went suddenly numb, while his hand all but dropped the gun. He had the twin weapon in his left hand by now, and with it sent a shot at the top of the partition. Then still facing the barroom, he kicked open the door behind him and with the rain beating on his back, stood yelling a challenge to them to try to finish him. There was no reply. A full half-minute he bellowed a defiance at his enemies and the whole town. Canaan didn't want a law-enforcing marshal; they wanted a cat's paw to pull chestnuts out of the fire.

Down an alley he staggered to the livery stable. While the stable man saddled hastily, Whelan put his arm in a makeshift bandanna sling. Men were calling to one another out in the darkness; they were on his trail, but afraid to come too close to a fighting man gone berserk.

Someone was beside him as he lifted a foot into a stirrup, the Thomas youngster. "Mister, you ain't in no shape to ride. Come to our house; we'll look after you."

Go to Martha McCrae's house! He cursed the boy, and by a tremendous effort heaved himself into the saddle. His job was done in Canaan; it had been his rule to quit when the men who hired him proved as crooked as the men he had been brought in to clean up. His job was done here, but they weren't running him out. He'd give them a chance to finish the battle. Deliberately he rode down the main street, stopped in front of the Louderbaugh saloon where the lights were flaring wildly in the wind that swept through the open door.

Then he rode on through the rain. He had to get out of town before he died here and they found that he was Whelan Rawson who they said had been afraid to face death with nine other men.

THE horse slogged along through the rain, past the houses on the outskirts, and Whelan, clinging to the saddle, head-

ed south. If he didn't make it, all right. It would be a fitting end to a man that had held bad cards all his life.

The miles passed slowly while he lost blood. For a while he rode straight up, then he began to slump down, lower and lower.

Dimly he was aware that another horse was coming after him through the rain. With his left hand he tried to bring out the gun, but he couldn't make it. He was done for. Whoever was closing in to finish up the job wouldn't have much trouble. There was but one rider following him, and he grunted suddenly as he stopped, letting the rider come up, a small figure on a pony.

"I told you, kid, to keep the hell out of my affairs," snarled Whelan.

"There's an old building near here, where you can hole up, Mister Marshal," said the boy. "Right over here." The lad reached out to take the bridle of Whelan's horse.

In his weakness Whelan resigned himself to this boy who seemed to have appointed himself as his guardian. They were in a rock-walled passageway, a canyon or pass, and through the rain loomed the bulk of a small building. As they stopped, the boy's arms were about him, helping him dismount. A key grated in a padlock while Whelan hung to a stirrup leather. Then the arms were holding him and guiding him through a gate and into a room.

"Look here, your mother will be worried," mumbled the marshal.

"Told her I was riding out to stay with an old-timer and wouldn't be back tonight."

Whelan was being guided across a room in thick darkness until he contacted the edge of a bunk. On this he sank wearily, while the boy built a fire in a corner fireplace. The leaping flames drove the dark out of the room, and Whelan stared about him—at the windows which were not windows but rifle slits boarded over. . . .

WHELAN had a hard time of it, almost as hard as he had had in the fort hospital, days and nights of delirious talk and fevers that burned his body gaunt. The doctor rode out secretly at night, glad of the opportunity to treat so famous a figure as Marshal Whelan. The little stage station became a small hospital room. There was a mattress and sheets on the bunk, a bench with medicine bottles, rolls of bandages and cotton. And always the boy taking care of him.

"You got a good nurse, Whelan," said the doctor on one of his visits, when Whelan's fever seemed to have burned out. But Whelan only grunted; he didn't want this boy taking care of him; he reminded Whelan too much of the past.

"I got to say something to you, Marshal," went on the doctor.

"What is it? I won't pull through?"

"Not that. You'll make it. But your right arm—it won't ever be any good again. Not for your business. It's lucky you can use your left hand as well as your right."

"I can't," said Whelan Rawson. "I hardly ever handled a gun with my left hand. My second gun was only a extra."

The doctor pursed his lips. "Then you're done for as a marshal. You wouldn't last a day. That boy here could almost beat you. Your right elbow will be as stiff as a board."

But Whelan didn't care. He could go back to his ranch. Men might come there to kill him, enemies who had been afraid before to try their skill against him. They would come if they knew, but they wouldn't know. This doctor would respect a professional secret.

When he was able to swing out of the bunk and the cast was off the arm, he told Dick Thomas to go home for a while.

The boy went to stay a couple of nights, and Whelan found himself lonely without the serious-faced youngster.

"Ever had any bones broken?" he asked when the boy was back.

"Yeah. Horse fell with me and busted my right arm at the elbow. The other one was caught in a rope and busted in the same place. But they're as well as ever; don't bother me a bit."

But Whelan could see the boy's awkward movements when he picked up things, and testing the boy's quickness by flinging something for him to catch, he found the lad painfully slow.

"What was your idea in following me around town, son?" he asked.

"I'd heard a lot about yuh. They say you were the fastest gunman that ever pinned on a marshal's badge. Wanted to see how you worked it. Figgered I could learn something. Some gun tricks."

Whelan laughed suddenly, and the unfamiliar sound startled him. "That might of been kind of dangerous—trailin' me around, in hope of seeing me in a fight," he remarked. "What's your idea in wanting to learn to handle a gun?"

"To git that Cullinan and his gang."

"Look here," advised Whelan, "you forget that Cullinan outfit. You'll never have a chance with even the slowest sort of gunman. Stay away from trouble. You're too slow, savvy? Those broken arms did for you. You got no chance of making even a fair gunfighter."

The boy forced back sudden tears. "Mebbeso," he said slowly. "But I'm aimin' for a settlement with them just the same. They're tryin' to rob my mother of her ranch. If I can't kill 'em with a six-shooter, I'll take a shotgun and blast Cullinan and his bunch to hell."

"Forget it. Cullinan is a good man with a gun, and two of his men, Means and Bucks, are outlaws that have lived by a gun all their lives."

"And are goin' to die by it!" burst out the boy. "They stole Mom's cattle so she couldn't pay taxes. We got to the end of the month to redeem the ranch. It's a plain steal, and Mom's got nobody but me to fight for her."

The marshal was silent. He had nothing to do with all that. He could sit a horse again, and he might as well be riding off home. The boy had been pasturing his horse below the Pass, a black gelding that the boy had admired. Whelan knew Dick would never take money for taking care of him, but he could leave the horse.

In the early morning, leaving Dick still sleeping, Whelan saddled the boy's pony and rode out of Dolores Pass where he would always be counted a coward and where nothing could ever change that verdict. He had carved out a new name for himself, one that symbolized courage. No one would ever know that Marshal Whelan was Whelan Rawson, considered the only coward among ten men.

Riding through the darkness, he thought back to the old days and halted the pony a mile or so below the stage station. It seemed to him that through the morning stillness he could hear the faint sound of guns. Ghost guns, triggered by the ghosts of brave men. And fighting with them was the ghost of Whelan Rawson.

He rode on a little distance and stopped again. Martha McCrae Thomas would not take help from him if she knew who he was. Nor would the boy. They would both hate him. He wasn't wanted.

To help Martha McCrae he would have to face her, and when she identified him, as she surely would, he would see what he had always feared above all things—the look of scorn on her face. How could there be anything else when she had given her boy courage to fight single-handed a

whole gang of ruffians?—the fighting blood that was the Rawson heritage.

And suddenly to Whelan Rawson was given courage sufficient to face the scorn of the woman he had loved. A groan came from the man, and he did the bravest thing he had ever done in his life. He turned his horse and rode the trail back toward the old Dolores Pass stage station. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

A Bluff That Failed

THE boy was still sleeping, his arms, which could never learn to handle a six-shooter swiftly, outstretched. Whelan, looking down at the boy, shook his head pityingly, and then set to work frying bacon and making coffee. The smell of food awakened Dick Thomas.

He sat up and dressed. "I had a dream you rode off, Mister Marshal Whelan," he said in his serious way. "But even while I was a-dreamin' it, I knowed it was a dream. You ain't the kind to run from a bunch that ganged up on yuh."

"I hope not," said Whelan. "I guess even that Rawson that run off here long ago, if he'd sleep in this house a while, he'd probably soak in enough courage not to run from something even worse than a killer outfit. You ever hear your mother speak of that Rawson?"

"Yeah. She never talked much about him though. I think she felt a little sorry for that hombre. Once when I was a-cussin' him out, she said mebbe we didn't know all the circumstances and hadn't no right to talk."

The boy washed himself in the tin basin and flung out the soapy water. "You aimin' to go back to Canaan to wipe out that bunch that jumped yuh?"

"I'm going back, but not for that. Being marshal was just a job with me, Dick, and there was no job left when the mayor joined the crooks. Your mother needs money worse than the town needs cleaning up. I know a way to get it. By something I never done before—selling men for the rewards on 'em. But the pair of outlaws I'm thinking of belong behind bars, and you and me, we'll corral 'em tonight. We'll rest today and mosey in to Canaan about dark."

They loafed until late afternoon when they prepared to lock up the station.

"It's been left just the way it was when they found the nine dead Rawsons here," said the boy. "About ever' year at the time of the fight, the relatives of those men come here to stay a day or so on the place where their people was killed. That time ain't far off. We ain't heard from 'em, so guess they ain't comin' this year."

Taking the trail to Canaan, they reached the ugly little town after dark.

"I'd be mighty proud to have you meet Mom," said the boy, and in the darkness he could not see Whelan flinch. Then Whelan nodded his head. It had to come sooner or later, and the boy had given him enough courage even to face Martha McCrae Thomas. Silently he followed the boy to a little house at the edge of the town.

THE door opened and someone carrying a lantern came toward them as they pulled up at the corrals.

"That you, Dick?" came in a woman's voice. Whelan still remembered that voice; its soft, rich tone was characteristic of the girl he had loved. He still thought of her as a girl; she had been barely eighteen when she married, and she was now only thirty-three. She held the lantern high to look at the riders. Whelan hadn't hoped to fool her keen eyes, and as she held the lantern close to Whelan's face, she gasped suddenly and he realized that she had recognized him.

"This is my mother," said the boy. "And this here is Marshal Whelan."

"Whelan?" the woman exclaimed, stopping abruptly.

"Your son, Mrs. Thomas," said Whelan as he dismounted, "saved my life by taking care of me in the old stage station at Dolores Pass. He had an idea I was worth saving."

The woman nodded. "He told me he was taking care of Marshal Whelan. You were a brave man to come into Canaan and to face them all in Louderbaugh's place. Dick, get my jacket, will you? I'm cold."

The boy left the two, Dick's mother still holding the lantern so that she could see Whelan's face. She had turned pale and the hand holding the lantern shook a little.

"You've been gone a long time, Whelan," she said in a low voice.

"Yes, a long time. I would never have come back at all if the name of the valley hadn't been changed."

"You went away without a word—after the Dolores Pass fight. You might have come to see me before you left."

"I saw you," he told her "During the funeral at the fort."

"But no one saw you there."

"No. I was in the—where no one could see me. I'd have come to see you, but there didn't seem any reason for it."

"You could have explained. There must have been some explanation for it. I've thought and thought about it. Whether a man fights or not is his own business, but I knew there was some reason why you weren't there with the rest." Her voice broke. "It's a terrible thing to have to wonder why the man you loved was not found lying dead with other men. I don't blame anyone for anything. Not even Burt Cullinan for trying to steal my ranch. Whelan, I waited for you to come to tell me about it—but you never came!"

"What could there have been to tell?" he returned harshly. "Plain to understand, wasn't it? Burt Cullinan left ten men who later decided to hold Dolores Pass until they were all killed. And when the men were found, there were only nine. The tenth man had run."

"But I would have tried to see your side, Whelan," she said softly. "After all, those men were strangers to you, distant relatives. That fight was theirs, not yours. I had promised to marry you. I had a right to an explanation. When I didn't get it, I married someone else."

"He must have been a good man," said Whelan. "To have been Dick's father. But if I had come to explain, you might have listened?"

"Yes, I'd have listened. And I'd have believed whatever you told me, no matter what others thought. I would have defended you from what they were saying."

There was silence for a long time, then Whelan's shoulders sagged wearily. "It's too late now. If I had dreamed that you would have listened, Martha, I would have come. I always have loved you. I never cared for anyone else and never will. I hope to help you in your fight against Cullinan. But I'd like to borrow Dick for tonight."

The boy had returned, bringing his mother's jacket. She stood, watching them ride out of the little yard, down the crooked street, and after they had disappeared she still stood there holding the lantern, weeping softly. Whelan Rawson had come back as Marshal Whelan, who was said to be a cold-blooded killer, a man who did not know the meaning of fear nor any other emotion.

CANAAN without its two-gun marshal was running wide open. There came the discord of loud laughter and the blare of a dance-hall orchestra.

Waiting in the darkness of an alley, Whelan sent the boy on a scout to locate Bucks and Means on whose heads were rewards. Waiting there, Whelan shivered in the cold air. He was far from full recovery, and his right arm was as stiff as two hinged pieces of board, where once it had been a fluent thing of muscle, moving with a swiftness beyond the eye to follow.

So handicapped, he had only one protection: no one except the doctor and Dick knew how badly he had been hurt. With his reputation and his single-handed fight in Louderbaugh's saloon, men would still be seeing Marshal Whelan, the killing machine.

Dick Thomas returned to report that means and Bucks were in the saloon which Tom Louderbaugh had run. Burt Cullinan was out at the Thomas ranch with most of his riders. The saloon was quiet; barely half a dozen men in the place, and none from Cullinan's outfit except Bucks and Means. Their horses were tied in front at the hitchrack. Apparently it was made to order for Whelan. With Dick leading the horses after him, Marshal Whelan strode down the street.

As he stepped into the saloon, Bucks and Means turned with the chill draft of air to look at the newcomer.

"Marshal Whelan!" gasped Means and his hand went down toward his gun but halted short of completing the movement. Whelan didn't attempt to draw a gun as he calmly marched over to the two.

"I'm arresting you two fellows," he stated. "Taking your guns."

At this the breed, Means, who was the bravest of the two, again started to drop his hand down to his gun, only to stop once more. His brain was telling his hand that this was Marshal Whelan who could kill him in a second, who had beaten a dozen faster men than Means ever hoped to be—Marshal Whelan, who was certain, quick death. Means raised his hands and Whelan took the man's gun.

Bucks was staring with small rat eyes at Whelan, noticing that the marshal was reaching with his left hand for Mean's gun. He was certain that Whelan had been hit in the arm in the battle in this saloon, and now below the shirt sleeve he thought he could see a bandage bulging over the elbow.

"Damn him, he's hurt!" Bucks bellowed and went for his gun as he stepped back. Whelan moved fast, ramming his solid body against the man instead of trying to draw a gun. The impact smashed Bucks back against the wall, dazing him. Before Bucks could recover, Whelan had the man's gun, and was swinging it to cover both men.

"Outside," he ordered, and they marched out ahead of him and across the board walk to their horses which Dick was untying. Cursing, the pair mounted and Whelan tied their hands to their saddlehorns, using his right arm with difficulty.

"By God," snarled Means, "your right arm is plumb gone and you can't use your left. You ain't no gunman no more. A kid could beat you to a iron."

"Knowing that won't do you any good where you're going," said Marshal Whelan. "I'm selling you down the river for those old train holdups."

THEY rode out, heading across the range, with Dick up ahead, leading the prisoners' horses. At dawn they came into the county-seat, where Whelan roused the sheriff.

"Brought you a couple of prisoners," he told the officer. "Lemme introduce 'em. On the left, Sam Blayden, alias Bill Bucks, and on the right, Joe Means, whose right name is Clay Folsom. They were in Black Jack Smith's gang, and you can find their faces on a picture Black

Jack's gang had taken in El Paso. I want the reward money, and I want it quick—by wire."

"Sure, Marshal Whelan," said the sheriff affably. "The express and railroad companies know you well enough to take your word that you got two men they want. But I always heard you never took rewards."

"These go to pay taxes on a ranch," stated the marshal. "Figure ought to be around fifteen hundred."

Dick Thomas grinned suddenly. "That'll pay a heap of taxes," he said. "Take it out o' Cullinan's paws. I dunno if we oughta take it from yuh, mister."

"Expert nursing comes high," said Whelan.

They had to wait over a day for the money. When it arrived, the marshal and Dick Thomas went over to the county treasurer's office and got a handful of receipts.

After that they rode back to Canaan. Both realized that the fight had only started. Cullinan, who had already taken charge of the Thomas ranch, counted it as his, and would not be giving it up because of a few tax receipts.

"You got no call to take a hand in this scrap," said the boy thoughtfully as they rode.

"Haven't I?" said Whelan. "A heap more reason than you think, son."

When they rode into Canaan in the morning, the town came out to stare as they had done on the marshal's first return from the county-seat. Burt Cullinan, Locker and Cassell were among the watching men, with a scraggy old fellow beside the mayor, wearing a marshal's badge. Whelan told the boy to ride home and headed for Cassell and Locker's store.

The partners had gone inside and were pretending to be busy in their office when he entered. "I see," said Whelan, "that you've got a new marshal. I don't remember offering my resignation."

Mayor Locker stuttered. "Why—uh—you left town, and we figured the job was naturally open," he stated.

"I took the job; I'm still keeping it," stated Whelan. "Shell out the salary you owe me. Includin' double pay for the time I was laid up. I can use that money to hire some men to right range on Mrs. Thomas's ranch."

"Bucking Cullinan, are you?" said Locker, and he seemed pleased as he took a roll of bills from the safe and counted out Whelan's pay.

"Yeah, I'm buckin' Cullinan. How about you two?"

"Who, us?" said Locker hurriedly. "We want no trouble with you. That other night was a mistake; we was comin' in to help you, Whelan."

"Thanks," said Whelan dryly. "Meanwhile don't forget you hired me to bring law and order to Canaan. Don't mix between Cullinan and me."

EATING breakfast in the Chinese restaurant, Whelan realized that he was riding along the edge of a precipice. If but one man called his bluff, he was done. And Cullinan would be calling it. He had too many men to back down from any single man. Cullinan would act promptly, too; he was the nervous sort who couldn't stand uncertainty. He was in town that morning with a bunch of his riders, and Whelan judged that the restaurant as good a place as any to wait for him.

Half an hour later the tramp of booted feet sounded along the walk and half a dozen men entered, Cullinan at their head. Whelan stood up, hooking his thumbs in his cartridge belt.

"You're settin' in on a game where you wasn't invited," snarled Cullinan.

"The game looks plumb public to me,"

stated Whelan. "What do you want, Cullinan? As marshal and deputy sheriff, I'm at your service."

"You're a candidate for Boot Hill," snarled Cullinan.

"Start something here and I'll kill you and at least three of those long-haired *bravos* of yours, Cullinan," Whelan promised calmly. "They might look wild when they see themselves in a mirror, but the look like a bunch of long-haired yahoos to me. Remember, Cullinan, you and three more, if you make a move for a gun."

Standing there, talking to the crowd of men, any one of whom could have beat him to a gun, he was confidence itself, Marshal Whelan with all the prestige of many gun battles behind him. He was enough to make Cullinan hesitate, until his dark eyes fastened on the Marshal's right arm. Whelan was certain then that Cullinan knew the marshal's arm was no good; that he was through as a gunfighter. A bluff wasn't enough. Stronger medicine was needed to stop Cullinan, and to save Whelan's scalp. Boldly Whelan stepped close to the man and the guns that were eager to be unleashed against him.

"Cullinan," drawled Whelan, "I once knew a fellow who volunteered to bring ammunition back to a fighting bunch. Those men waited a long time, but the ammuniton didn't come, nor the man who had promised to bring it. They waited, in fact, until they were killed—all but one."

Cullinan had listened in shocked wonder, his black eyes opening wide, a vein in the forehead beginning to pulse. In a dead silence that followed, the man, as if he were seeing Whelan for the first time, examined every feature of the marshal's face. And slowly recognition came. Only one man could have known about Cullinan's cowardice at Dolores Pass. The tenth man, Whelan Rawson. And this *was* Whelan Rawson.

Cullinan's breath was expelled in a great sigh. All the man's bluster was gone. Shaken, confused, he turned on his heel and without a word walked out. His riders followed after him, wondering. Their boss had told them to follow him in to kill a man with a crippled arm, and then he had walked out, as pale as if he had seen a ghost. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Cullinan's Last Deal

FIVE cowboys rode out that same day day with Marshal Whelan and Dick Thomas and his mother to the ranch which Cullinan had taken over. Whelan knew he could trust these five, all cowboys who had once worked for Martha McCrae Thomas, and still held a strong sense of loyalty toward her.

They found the ranch house occupied by three Cullinan riders and a slovenly cook. These men yielded possession grudgingly, and left, muttering threats of what Cullinan would do. The five riders put their warbags in the bunkhouse, and gathered some of the old Thomas remuda. They were to round up what Thomas cattle could be found, including those which had had their marks blotted by Cullinan's cowboys.

Marshal Whelan could see Martha's eyes kindle when she and Dick looked on the home that was again theirs. The woman turned to Whelan suddenly, her face a-glow with happiness.

"You did this," she said.

"It's only a temporary possession," he warned her. "And dangerous for you out here. Maybe doing you more harm than good. You'd better leave this country, Martha, until the trouble's settled. You've got relatives you could visit?"

"Yes, I've relatives," she said. "Many relatives."

All of the Rawson families who journeyed over here almost every year, some several hundred miles, to visit the stage station and then the cemetery at the fort, would stick by her. She would be welcome at the homes of any of them, but she wouldn't go. The Rawson women didn't run any more than the Rawson men.

Returning to Canaan that night, Whelan found the little town ready to eat out of his hand. Added to the weight of his reputation was the fact that Cullinan and six cowboys had backed down from a finish fight with him. Cullinan himself had left; there were various rumors about him, one that he had gone to try to free Means and Bucks, his two chief fighting men. Whelan smiled grimly at that: those two were due to spend most of their lives behind bars.

For a few days it was a waiting game, with Whelan spending the time between Canaan and the Thomas ranch. He practised drawing a gun with his left hand, only to realize it was too late to try that now. That was just a low card in the hand dealt him—but he was used to playing poor hands.

About his part in the Dolores Pass battle he still kept silent. Sometimes he felt like blurting it out, of telling the truth to Martha McCrae Thomas. To him she was even more beautiful than she had been as a girl. When their glances met, they bridged the fifteen years back to their youth. But he couldn't quite bring himself to tell her his side of Dolores Pass; in his bitter pride he had long ago resolved never to tell.

He had been running away all his life from that disgrace, and nothing he realized could clear him now. Martha might believe him because of her old love for him, but even in her mind would remain some ghost of a doubt.

ONE of Cullinan's activities finally came to the surface. At the county seat he had tried to swear out a warrant for the arrest of Marshal Whelan for the murder of Tom Louderbaugh, but the authorities only laughed at him. As for his allies, Locker and Cassell, they were no help to Cullinan; that pair was filled with the fear of sudden death.

Out on the ranch Martha Thomas's five riders were finding plenty of her cattle with brands changed clumsily to Cullinan's although the cowboys never rode far from the house. The marshal had ordered them to remain near by to give protection, if necessary, to the woman and her son. For Cullinan was preparing to fight.

Not satisfied with his present force, he began to enlist barroom loafers, and Canaan suddenly blossomed out with men wearing heavy cartridge belts and making whiskey brags over the war that Cullinan was starting. In this isolated valley, as in the days when Ab Gregg had moved his renegade army in on the Rawsons, might was still right, save for a marshal who was still a deputy sheriff.

In the face of this threat Marshal Whelan prepared the Thomas ranch for a siege, closing the windows with bags of sand, preparing bullet-proof barricades and laying in a plentiful supply of ammunition.

When trouble broke, it came with the speed of a summer thunderstorm. The five Thomas cowboys had been working a canyon a few miles from the ranch, riding for cattle in the breaks. Whelan and Dick were at the ranch itself, building a corral. Martha was in the house roasting a wild turkey that Dick had dropped from a pine tree roost.

It was in the late afternoon when they

heard a sudden thunder of shots, echoing heavily in the canyon where the five cowboys had been riding. Whelan at once mounted and raced to a little hill, taking with him a pair of field glasses. The canyon bottom seemed full of horsemen and a small battle was in progress. The Thomas riders had been coming home with a bunch of cattle when a small army of men had ridden in between them and the ranch. As Whelan watched, he saw that the five were being driven steadily back up the canyon. It had been agreed that at the first sign of trouble the cowboys should come to the ranch, to fort up, but he could see at once that they were cut off, and more, that the attackers were deliberately shooting the horses of the five, setting them afoot.

Then while part of the army stayed to complete this slaughter, the rest turned and, led by Cullinan, came sweeping down toward the ranch. Whelan at once spurred back to the house.

"Son," he told Dick who had ridden up to meet him, "we've got to run. Cullinan has tied his wolves loose. Too many for us to hold that big house. We got to get out of here."

"I hadn't figured to run," said the boy, disappointed.

Martha Thomas, carrying a double-barreled shotgun, came from the house, and Whelan pulled up by her.

"It's Cullinan," he told her, "and we've got to get out. Maybe he only wants me, but there's no tellin' if he'd stop with that."

She hurried to the house to put a little food in saddle bags. While Dick saddled a horse for her, Whelan flung boxes of cartridges into sacks to be carried with them: this time there would be no scarcity of ammunition.

As they mounted, they could hear the distant click of hoofs. The shooting up the canyon had died away to a few occasional shots. The five Thomas cowboys evidently had all been set afoot and could be of no help.

"We'll head for Dolores Pass," Whelan decided. "I can hold them from coming through there, a long enough time at least to allow you two to make it to the Bar Y outfit on the flats."

THERE was no time to argue with him then; Martha merely swung up in the saddle and they rode out from the corrals. As they spurred into a little range of foothills above which lay Dolores Pass, they looked back and saw Cullinan's horsemen come boiling over the hill by the ranch house. Catching sight of the fleeing trio, the whole party turned to sweep after them. A few guns opened up, but the range and the brush prevented accurate shooting.

The three rode at a horse-killing pace, Whelan setting it over the rough ground, with Martha following, riding as skillfully as a man. Behind them Dick Thomas and his horse were one. The boy would never become a gunman, but his crippled arms did not prevent him from being a rider.

They held their distance ahead of their pursuers, through the rough hills and up a steep trail that led to the old Dolores Pass. And by spurring their mounts unmercifully, they still held that lead when they rode between the narrow walls of the pass itself. Ahead of them blocking the passageway between the valley on one side and the flat plain beyond was the homely old mud-walled stage station. Beyond it, just out of the entrance to the deep trench made by the parallel cliffs, was the arroyo down which Rawson had taken his plunge on that rainy night, in a hopeless attempt to reach a supply of cartridges.

Here at the station Whelan figured to hold back the pursuit until night. By then,

by fast riding, Dick and Martha Thomas could be at the Bar Y ranch where enough cowboys were employed to keep off Cullinan's desperadoes. Whelan took a grim pleasure in thinking that he would see another battle at the old stage-coach station. His stiff arm would not handicap him in using a rifle and shotgun.

He pulled up by the little corral. "Give me the key," he told Dick. "I'm staying here. You two ride on. As soon as it gets dark, I'll follow you. Leave my horse where you pastured him while I was laid up here. I'll pick him up."

"That all sounds very simple," said Martha Thomas, "but we won't go on without you, Whelan. You ride with us, or we won't go."

"They'll pull up with us on the flat," he objected. "They've been saving some of their horses while the rest pushed ours to the limit. Cullinan is a rabid wolf. He wants your ranch and he won't stop at anything—no more than that renegade Ab Gregg and his army."

"Yes, he's like Ab Gregg and that renegade army Ab brought in," agreed Martha Thomas. "Out to make a kill. Which is why we're not leaving you here."

Dick unlocked the door of the corral and went into the small room. Whelan and Martha Thomas dismounted to let their horses breathe. She came close to him suddenly and kissed him. His arms went around her hungrily.

"Don't you see?" she murmured. "I still love you. If we ride on, I want you to ride with us; if we stay, we'll stay together. I won't give you up now as I gave you up before. Not here, at least, to be killed by those men."

WHELAN held her close for a moment and then swung her back on her horse. She sat there crying, while Dick emerging from the station stopped to stare, amazed. And Martha Thomas dismounted to kneel by the boy's side, to kiss him again and again as she held him to her.

"You ride on, Dick," she told the boy. "I'm going to stay with Marshal Whelan. My place is with him. I knew him long ago. I loved him; I still do, Dick. You ride to the Bar Y ranch; maybe they will send help; anyway, you'll be safe there."

"Huh!" grunted the boy. "I was figgerin' to stay with him myself, while you rode on to the Bar-Y. This fight is for men, Mom. You got to go on. Rawson men don't let their women fight for 'em."

"You Rawson men," she said softly, looking on Marshal Whelan. "Afraid of nothing, except that their women might not believe them. We're all staying. This old stage station where Blake and the others fought and died won't let us down. But, Dick, you're too young. Not nearly as old as Dick Rawson who died here. The Rawson women can fight, too. You're light, Dick; you can easily make it to the Bar-Y."

She tried to force the boy on his horse, just as the Cullinan riders came thundering into the pass, raising a yell at sight of their quarry, and sending bullets that whistled over the heads of the three.

Dick wrenched free from his mother's arms. "You must think I'm like that Rawson was that run away!" he burst out angrily, and the woman noticed that Whelan flinched as if from a blow.

They were in for it and Whelan ran in the corral, to bar the stout old gate of cedar posts. Inside the station itself, the woman and boy began ripping off the boards which covered the rifle slits.

Again the Rawsons would be defending Dolores Pass—to the end. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The Brave Never Die

CULLINAN'S men were riding fast, strung out in a long line. The leaders

pulled up some distance from the station, and one man rode out alone, waving a white silk neckerchief tied on the end of his rifle barrel.

Riding up to within a few yards of the station, he pulled up his horse. "Who's in there?" he called.

"Rawsons," answered Martha McCrae Thomas. "Three real Rawsons, not the half-breed kind you are, Burt Cullinan."

"But you're including one Rawson that once run away," sneered the man. "Although, of course, he's dished out lies to explain that. I want to talk to you, Martha—alone. For your own good."

"You might as well hear what he says," Whelan advised.

"I don't want to listen to him," she returned. "I hate him from his hat to his boots." But she went out, through the gate of cedar posts, her neckerchief whipping in the wind that came out of the black sky. A few drops of rain were already falling.

Cullinan dismounted as she came up. "I suppose," he said, "you know that's Whelan Rawson. The man that run off and left Blake and the rest to die."

"That's a lie," she said directly. "And you know it's a lie."

The man started at that, searching her face for evidence that Whelan might have told her of Cullinan's part in that affair.

"Have it your own way; believe him 'stead of me," he told her. "If you want to tie up with him, all right, but you're putting yourself beyond all help from me. I wasn't trying to steal your ranch. I wanted it for you and me both."

"You wanted it for yourself," she flamed back at him. "Except that by stealing it you thought you'd force me to marry you. I'd never do that, except maybe to save the life of my son."

"And it might get down to that," he returned coolly. "I'm tired of fooling. If I can't have you, no one else will either, least of all, Whelan Rawson. What's he been telling you about me?"

"He's told me nothing," she replied. Cullinan brightened at that. It made Cullinan smile inwardly. "But Whelan never ran—that I know," said Martha Thomas positively. "He's not the kind that runs. You are, Burt. You've got no loyalty, no real courage."

"So that's what you think of me," he snarled. "Nobody will be knowing what you think, lady. The only law here is your two-gun marshal friend and he dug his grave when he fought me. Listen here, Martha, I've waited for you a long time. Give him up and save yourself and Dick. You could get the drop on him easy and turn him over to us and—"

She cut him off. "Ride back, Burt. You should know better than to try to bribe me. I've loved him all these years, understand? And now he's back, I'll not desert him. If he doesn't want to explain what happened here fifteen years ago, I'll ride away with him, and let anyone just dare to call him a coward in my hearing. And as for your ending him, and us, we'll see. In that old stage station, there won't be just us three—there'll be others fighting with us. Nine men—the nine Rawsons who were killed there!"

Cullinan forced a croaking laugh. In his own heart he wished that the three had holed up in some other place. He had never visited the station but once, before the dead men had been taken away. The open eyes of some of the men had seemed to stare at him accusingly. He shivered now as Martha Thomas went on.

"There'll be Blake Rawson and his son, Dick; there'll be Blake's brothers and the Englishman, Warington. All of them will be fighting for us. The brave never die!"

"You're crazy," Cullinan declared. He flung himself back on his horse. "You asked for it. Take what's coming to you." He realized that he would never get any-

where with this woman, who clung to a love which had weathered time and ignored the scoffing tongues that called Whelan a coward.

"There's one thing, Cullinan," Whelan called from the corral. "We've got plenty of ammunition this time."

The only answer was a growl as Cullinan rode to join his men. . . .

CALMLY Whelan made his preparations for the attack, reinforcing the door of the station, nailing on its inside a sheet of iron which he had discovered in the corral. Braced on the inside with cedar posts, it would take a strong ram manned by half a dozen men to batter it down.

Drowning out the steady drumming of the rain came the roar of the guns, as Cullinan's warriors pushed along the pass, under cover of fallen cliff fragments. From behind the corral walls Whelan traded shots with them. He had plenty of ammunition to waste; cartridges for pistols, rifles, and shells for the scattergun of Martha Thomas, loaded with nine buckshot, each capable of killing a man.

A rush, as darkness came with a still harder downpour of rain, carried Cullinan to the cover of the fallen boulders in front of the station. Here they blazed away, until Whelan climbed to the flat roof of the station and opened up on them unexpectedly with his rifle. They fell back in panic after he hit two men, and retired to cook and eat supper in the cold comfort of the rain.

In the room the three also ate, by a blaze in the corner fireplace where Blake Rawson, watching over the Dutch ovens, had written his record of the battle.

As marshal and sheriff, Whelan had led posses in the final roundup of many bandit gangs, rustlers, countless plain and fancy desperadoes. He knew all the tricks of fighting, when to wait coolly, when to attack. In contrast Cullinan, the nervous sort who lived at high tension, wanted to get this battle over in a hurry. Four of his men had been put out of the fight before it got fairly started, but Cullinan had plenty to spare, and a supply of whiskey hurried out from Canaan lent them all courage.

Early in the battle Whelan saw that they could not hold the corral, but when it was impossible to hold it any longer he had a trap prepared, one to make Cullinan pay a high price for its capture. Too drunk to take precautions, the Cullinan gunmen rushed the corral gate to batter it down with a ram, while others sent in a continuous fire to keep Whelan's gun silent. Suddenly, the heavy corral gate opened with unexpected ease, and yelling exultantly, the Cullinan warriors dropped the ram and poured inside.

From the doorway of the station and the slits looking out on the corral, came the blasting roar of guns—the shotgun, fired by Whelan from the door, rifles held by Martha and Dick Thomas. The three guns made havoc among the thick cluster of bodies, and wounded men went down screaming, while the rest scrambled back out of the trap. The wounded lay in the corral moaning and calling for help until Whelan arranged a truce with Cullinan to give time for them to be carried away.

So far the three defenders had suffered only one small casualty. Dick Thomas had been slightly wounded on the face. He figured it would make a mighty impressive scar.

Angered by that disaster, and moved by the fear that he might fail in the end, Cullinan had his men hail in shots once more as preliminary to another rush into the corral. But that hard-won place seemed more of a handicap than a help to his men and they refused to occupy it. Cullinan's men weren't as good as Ab

Gregg's *bravos,* nor did Cullinan as a general compare with Gregg. While Marshal Whelan, as Cullinan had learned, was one who knew all the tricks of fighting, who didn't just stick in a hole and claw back blindly.

His men refused to try any further rushes, but sullenly insisted on staying outside the corral. That little stage station with the thick walls was a fort that had only one possible entrance and for hours they found no way of getting at it. Meanwhile the rain, coming down with increasing force, covered the hard earth with a sheet of water that made footing slippery.

INSIDE the three fought on with a grim calmness, exchanging a few words occasionally. They could have the happiest sort of life, Martha Thomas was thinking, if they could only escape this trap. Losing the ranch didn't matter; they could go anywhere, make a fresh start. She felt like praying and she did pray in a low murmur, which the guns drowned out.

Hour after hour they kept back the frantic efforts of Cullinan, who was like a furious dog barking as he tried to dig out a gopher. Retiring toward midnight with his men, there was a lull while they sent for more cartridges and whiskey and cursed the rain.

By the time the supplies came back, some old-timer in the group had an idea for rigging up an ingenious ram, slung from ropes so that it could be driven back and forth to hammer at the heavy door, while the men manipulating it stayed behind cover.

There was no way of stopping this awkward device when it was finally rigged up. Although the force of the blows of the tree trunk they used as a ram was not great, its incessant pounding loosened slowly the great bolts that had been set by some stage station tender in the thick frame of the doorway. Then the planks began to splinter, and Cullinan's men shouting exultantly figured they'd get back to Canaan in time for an early morning drink. Behind the planks the sheet iron placed by Whelan held up the ram for a while.

The same ingenious old-timer who had devised the bullet-proof ram also suggested the idea of sending men up to chop a hole in the thick dirt roof. With a hole in the roof and the door knocked down, it would be easy to fire enough shots to search out every corner in the little room.

As the dirt started falling over their heads and the planks and iron bent under the inexorable pounding of the ram, a murky dawn began to creep into the little room. Martha Thomas, looking at Whelan, read their fate in his eyes.

"Those men out there," he muttered, "they won't allow Cullinan to kill a woman and boy. You've got to get out of this, Martha, before they end us."

"I'll not go," she declared. "It will be the end of me anyway if you die, Whelan. Dick can go to live with our people—I'm staying here with you. Dick, you've forgotten it, but today is your birthday. Your fourteenth."

"Me, fourteen today?" exclaimed Dick Thomas. "Then this is the anniversary of the day of that fight in Dolores Pass. I was born on the second one, remember, Mom? I'm not leaving him either."

Whelan put his arm across the boy's shoulder. "Death is a poor birthday present for a fourteen-year-old boy," he said. But the boy shook his head.

He'd take whatever came. He was fighting where nine men of his family had fought, and he was inspired by the courage of those gallant heroes, Blake, the Englishman, Blake's brothers, and young Dick.

Yet all three knew they were doomed

to defeat. The long fight was all but over; it could end only as the other battle had ended, fifteen years before. Whelan resolved before he'd wait for his slaughter, like a cowering animal, he'd make a rush, go down fighting, gun in his hands. Martha Thomas took Dick in her arms, held him close, and then she drew Whelan into the circle.

"I'm not afraid—of whatever comes, meeting it with you two. We're not whipped yet. I've been praying, Whelan."

As if mocking that expression of faith a door plank gave way altogether, and a shot came through the hole in the roof over their heads.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Dead Speak

WHELAN had determined to wait for the door to come down, before starting one final desperate effort to save the lives of Dick Thomas and his mother. He'd take the shotgun and blast his way out, he decided, then with his rifle keep shooting until he had leveled the sights on Cullinan. There weren't enough guns outside to keep him from reaching that blood-thirsty renegade. Once Cullinan was killed, the others, Whelan figured, would not dare deliberately to murder a mother and her young son.

A rifle barrel was stuck by one of Cullinan's men in a rifle slit and fired blindly into the room. Whelan stepped swiftly to the opening to snap a shot at the man who had jumped back. More dirt was dropping through the roof, and now half a dozen shots came through the partly completed opening. Whelan forced Dick and his mother back in the safest corner, and grimly watched the door bend back before the blows of the ram.

But outside the ram stopped suddenly. There was a voice calling from out of the Pass, in the chill dawn that had followed the rainy night.

"What's going on here?" the man was inquiring.

Hope came to Martha Thomas, but not to Whelan. If a cowboy or two had chanced to ride through the pass, it wouldn't be enough to stop Cullinan.

"Ride on, you folks!" came Cullinan's angry command. "We've got some horse thieves holed up in here. Going to end 'em."

"Why, it's Burt Cullinan," came the voice of the stranger.

Slipping out from behind Whelan, Martha Thomas peered through a slit which looked out on the Pass. The sun had not yet penetrated the bottom of the trench of Dolores Pass, but she could see in the gray light that not one or two cowboys, but a strange procession, had come up. Buckboards, light wagons with canvas tops, buggies, all filled with people, and many riders alongside. Women and small children were in the vehicles, while men, all of them young fellows, and a few boys were on the horses. Light came to her weary brain. She gripped Whelan's arm hard in an almost hysterical excitement.

"It's the Rawsons. The one talking to Cullinan is young Blake Rawson, the oldest son of the man that led the fighting long ago. Whelan, today is the anniversary of that battle. They've come, as they always have, to spend the day and night here. I told Burt Cullinan that the dead would be fighting for us. They were! They brought us help."

"Ride on, Rawson," Cullinan was shouting harshly. "You can come back later to visit this place. We're finishin' these thieves, and we don't want nobody interferin'."

Martha Thomas raised her voice and in the silence that followed the stopping of the guns, it carried easily to the Rawsons.

"Blake, don't believe him," she called. "They're trying to kill us. I'm Martha Thomas."

THERE was a snarl of rage from Cullinan. When he ordered his men to open fire on the newcomers, he made the biggest mistake of his life. The approaching party of Rawsons, having heard the shooting as they rode into the pass, had their guns ready for an emergency. In a fresh outburst, rifles crashed in harsh discords from the rock throat of the Pass, the echoes reverberating in great bellowing claps of thunder.

Cullinan's gunmen were scattered about the station, while the Rawsons were in a compact group. Those on horseback, promptly flinging themselves behind their mounts, opened fire. Before their accurate, fast shooting the weary, whiskey-dazed warriors of Cullinan broke, hastily hunting cover, forgetting the three in the stage station.

The Cullinan fighters, hard-pressed by the fresh eager young fellows who had just ridden up, were utterly smashed when a new figure entered the fight. Marshal Whelan, kicking aside the broken door, came out scattering death in the corral with two barrels of the shotgun. He crossed to the gate and continued firing with the rifle, opening up on the men who had taken cover against the Rawsons. Beside Whelan appeared young Dick Thomas, kneeling, yelling exultantly at being in a fight where his crooked arms were no handicap. Cullinan's men turned in panic as the guns crashed behind them, picking them off one by one.

"You Cullinan, you're done for," shouted Whelan. "Throw down your guns."

A babel of voices arose at that, but all the fight had been taken out of the hired army. They called frantically that they were quitting. Obeying Whelan's barked command, men began to line up in the road, hands held high in the air.

But Burt Cullinan, crazed by this turn in fortune, went completely berserk. He pretended to join the rest in surrendering, mingling with the others until he was some twenty steps from Whelan. Promptly then he swept a six-shooter from a holster, determined to kill Whelan and get to a horse. Losing his own life even would not be too high a price to pay to get rid of the man who had smashed all his plans.

Whelan, holding his rifle in his hands, watchfully regarding the men as they surrendered, caught Cullinan's quick movement and automatically swung his gun to meet the threat. It was the rifle, and a marshal with a crippled right arm, against a six-shooter and the speed of a fast gunman. But it was more than that; it was matching a man who had fought all his life, whose nerves were ice, against a man high-strung, overwhelmed with disaster when victory had been in his grasp.

Cullinan's hurried bullet sailed far wide. He never had a chance to fire another one. The rifle crashing in the gateway of the corral sent Cullinan plunging down on his face. After a single convulsive tremor, he never moved again.

The Rawsons flocked in. Martha Thomas had not yet emerged from the station. One of the last shots of the battle, thudding into a little niche above the fireplace, had sent an object spinning down almost under Martha Thomas's feet. She had picked it up at the time, in the stress of the battle her eyes merely recording that it was a tobacco tin with a faded old English label which stirred faint memories in her.

She looked at the tin again when the first excitement of surrender was over, and remembered that the English remittance man, Warington, who had met death here, had used that fancy brand of

tobacco. It had been the subject of many a joke. Curious, she pulled the top off. There were papers inside!

Martha unfolded the ancient sheets. There were dark stains on them and many lines of writing. The writing she identified as the flowing script of Blake Rawson. Oblivious to the clamor of talk about her and the efforts being made by the women to look after the wounded Cullinan warriors, Martha Thomas read the notes which Blake Rawson had written during the desperate battle against Ab Gregg's renegade army. . . .

WHELAN was done. There was no further reason why he should stay longer. About him were the Rawsons, all his people, and yet not his people. They were the grown children of men alongside whom he had fought shoulder to shoulder, but if they knew his real name they would have recoiled from him as a traitor and coward.

No one except Martha Thomas knew his name, but there was one who had his shrewd suspicions, Dick Thomas.

The boy crossed to Whelan now. "That Cullinan," he said directly, "called out before the fight that we included one Rawson that had run away. It was a lie, o' course, a damn' lie."

But Whelan could see that the boy was uncertain; Dick was remembering that his mother and Whelan had known each other in the past, and that the marshal strangely bore the first name of the man who had run away.

Whelan shook his head, still moved by his stubborn pride which had never let him say a word to excuse himself, nothing to refute the verdict of cowardice. It was too late, anyway; Dick and the rest had been taught for years to hate and scorn the name of that tenth man.

"Cullinan was right," he said. "My name is Whelan Rawson."

"It can't be," protested Dick Thomas. "Why that—he run off. If you'd been fighting alongside Blake and the rest, they'd of won that scrap."

"Sorry, Dick," said Whelan. He looked around, hoping for another glimpse of Martha Thomas, but she was not in sight. She had told him that she would believe him against the world, but he could not accept her blind faith in him. Always spoiling their life, there would be between them some small doubt of his courage.

He started to walk down the trail that led through the pass, intending to pick up his horse below, and to ride away. He had gone twenty steps when Dick Thomas came running after him. Tears stood in the boy's eyes as he came up to Whelan.

"Where you going?" he demanded. "You don't think that anyone would believe you run that time? Not Marshal Whelan! I don't believe it. Mom doesn't. Even if you had run, you've made up for it since, but I know you stayed until there was some reason for gittin' out. I want you to stay, and so does Mom. You saved our ranch and our lives. You're the fightin'est fool that ever lived."

Whelan looked down on the boy. He could not have thought more of his own son. "You've made me mighty proud, Dick," he said. "You and your mother both—believing in me. It makes up for a lot. But I've got to leave. Tell your mother good-bye for me."

"You can do that yourself, Marshal Whelan," said a voice. They turned to see Martha Thomas standing behind them, smiling through her tears, and holding in one hand a round tobacco tin and in the other some sheets of paper.

"Whelan," she cried, "I've found something—Blake Rawson's record of that fight."

"I remember he wrote one," said Whelan. "But it was lost."

"I found it today. One of the Cullinan

shots knocked this tobacco can to the floor and in it was what Blake Rawson wrote."

She took his arm, to pilot him back to the corral. There the Rawsons stared at her in amazement, wondering at the light which transfigured her face. Some of the older women who remembered her as a girl had seen that look on Martha McCrae before the Dolores Pass fight. The word ran among them that she had miraculously discovered a message from Blake Rawson, written during that epic battle, and they all fell silent.

In silence they listened to Martha Thomas, standing by the side of a man who was a stranger to them, reading in a voice that trembled a little—reading the notes dashed off by Blake Rawson. There was recorded the death of Warington; the wounding and the death of Blake's son; a counter-attack led by their young Texas kinsmen, Whelan Rawson. She came to the cartridges that Cullinan had failed to bring before the start of the battle, because he lacked the nerve to throw in his lot with theirs.

Finally Martha read of the offer of Whelan to ride out for the ammunition; of Whelan's departure and the crash of guns that met him. "He surely was killed," Blake Rawson had written. "The bravest man I ever knew. May those of you who read this never forget him."

And then the last lines. "The end is near. The corral is taken. They will be in the station next. We have only half a dozen cartridges left among us—Sam, Blythe and me. May God be merciful to all our loved ones. Blake Rawson."

"Where were you after the fight?" Martha Thomas asked Whelan.

"In the hospital at the fort," he said. From him was lifted a great weight; a deep sigh came from his chest. Whelan's eyes were wet as he looked down at her and at Dick.

People were crowding about them, anxious to read with their own eyes the faded message from the grave of a brave man, but Whelan Rawson didn't see them. He stood with bowed head, holding Dick Thomas and his mother close, while within the marshal a dam broke, the dam of many bitter years of lonely living. . . .

THE END

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PROBAK JUNIOR

Deacon Bottle — Lynch Bait

By Robert E. Mahaffay

(Author of "The Deacon's Death Bargain," etc.)

A lynch mob was howling at his door when Deacon Bottle took up the fight of Emil Ryker, burned and badly beaten blacksmith—and swore that he would blot that shameful killer's brand from his friend, though he, himself, take the dying man's place.

DEACON BOTTLE wondered if the grimy scrap of paper in his pudgy fist had anything to do with the most callous and grisly crime ever committed in the Latigo country.

He had found the note slipped under the door of his hotel room upon his return at dawn from a two-day sojourn in the hills. That trip had been purely pious in nature. The good Deacon had been examining ways and means of financing a church in the cowtown of Latigo.

It was said in Latigo that if the church was ever built, it would likely be built with funds unlawfully procured—such was the Deacon's reputation. Whatever

the means contemplated by Deacon Bottle, however, he had found none that was suitable, and had come back empty-handed.

In spite of the early hour, a wrathfully seething town had met him on his return. Was there any news? Hadn't he heard? A shipment of currency bound by stage from Winton to Danville had been held up, the driver and guard murdered. Thirty thousand dollars gone! Two Danville women who, it appeared, had ridden upon the scene by accident had been brutally shot, presumably to prevent their identifying the raiders. One was dead, the other dying. The numbers of the bills had been on record, however. Every store and saloon within a hundred mile radius had the list of those numbers by now. If the Deacon . . . .

Now as Deacon Bottle studied the grimy slip of paper his plump lips tightened with a certain grimness. It read:

> Deer Deecon:
> I need help bad. Com heer rite away if you can.

He made out the ragged scrawl at the bottom to be the signature of Emil Ryker, Latigo's blacksmith.

Deacon Bottle took a final pull at the jug which had brought him to his room, and crammed on his low-crowned black hat. When he hit the street, propelling his bulky frame with the deceptive speed peculiar to his movements, he was aware that the fighting tension in the town had heightened perceptibly. Somewhere out of sight a man was shouting hoarsely. A harsh echo of answering voices knifed through the crisp morning air.

Caught up by a premonition that he could not explain, the Deacon hurried his pace. A man charged suddenly into the street before him. It was Enoch Starling, Latigo's sheriff, running awkwardly. He saw the Deacon, and slowed until he came up.

Pounding beside him, Deacon Bottle grunted protestingly, "What in hell's the rush, Enoch?"

Starling's rugged, mustached face was set in forbidding lines. He panted grimly. "Ryker! He passed one of the robbery bills last night. Just learned about it. Mob's aimin' to string him up."

A HEAVY sound behind them made Deacon Bottle turn his head. From a cross-street was pouring a ragged column of men. Guns were visible. A threatening roll of cries surged ahead of them.

"Better slide out of this, Deacon," advised Starling. "They may want Ryker, but they ain't gettin' him!"

"Get out? Me?" the Deacon growled, and reached down to feel if his two silver-mounted guns were free in the holsters.

The two men turned into the side street where Ryker's Shop was located. For a moment the mob behind them was blotted out. The front of the shop was open. It was little more than a leaky roof strung across an open space between two buildings; the forge stood in the middle of the dirt floor, while hung on the walls and piled in corners in colossal confusion were pieces of harness, strips of iron, dismantled buggies and half a hundred other nondescript items.

"He ain't here yet," Starling rumbled. "We'll try his shack."

But Deacon Bottle's roving blue eyes had picked up something the sheriff had missed. It was an arm, outflung on the floor behind the forge. "He's here," he said tersely.

They pressed into the rear of the little shop. Sprawled over a rusty heap of discarded metal was Emil Ryker. The smith's close-cropped head was bloody;

there was an ugly bruise on his forehead over the heavy brows. But it was neither of those things which made the Deacon's breath suck in sharply between his teeth. Ryker was stripped to the waist. On his burly chest was the clearly outlined brand of a horseshoe. Under the burn the flesh was swollen and congested.

"Beat us to him," Starling said wrathfully.

Deacon Bottle was kneeling by the unconscious Ryker. He looked up. "He's not dead, though I reckon whoever done it figgered he would be. How long ago did it come out that Ryker passed that bill?"

"Not more'n a quarter of an hour ago," said Starling. "The Desert Eagle was checking through—"

"Nobody beat us here, then," the Deacon pointed out curtly. "This was done some time last night—an' for a different reason!"

Then the surly cluster of townsmen clogged the opening to the shop. They surged uneasily there, checked by the stern-lipped Starling who straddled the body of Emil Ryker with a gun in his hand. But it was the sight of the Deacon there, as much as Starling's weapon, which blocked the crowd's murderous impulse.

The sheriff's voice rumbled at them. "Look your cards over careful 'fore you bet, boys. Nobody's layin' a hand on Emil Ryker but the law!"

The mob held back while they carried the body of the blacksmith down the street to his rude two-room cabin. Part of the crowd straggled sullenly after them. When they had stretched Ryker on the bunk, Deacon Bottle said, "I'll hunt up Doc Enley."

He stepped out through the door and immediately a hand touched him on the shoulder. There was a quality in that simple gesture which made the Deacon turn sharply and caused a defensive mask to drop over his round features.

"Nervous, Deacon?"

Deacon Bottle found himself staring into the warm, smoky gray eyes of Lew Brailsford. That warmth, Deacon Bottle knew, was deceiving. Tall, rugged and immobile of feature, Lew Brailsford was a handsome man. It was said that he had made his money in the Nevada mining country. He had moved into Latigo in the style of a gentleman accustomed to wealth, accustomed to command. He had invested money in the town, and it was hinted that under his guidance Latigo was due for developments which would result in universal prosperity. He had been installed as a matter of course as one of the leading citizens. A free-handedness in the saloons, and an affability on the streets had entrenched him further.

Deacon Bottle said, "Not nervous. Just careful."

Lew Brailsford chuckled. "Glad to hear it. You'll appreciate a tip then. You and Starling held the crowd off Ryker. Maybe if you, Deacon, hadn't been there it would have turned out different. Maybe you forgot that it's mighty dangerous lining up with a man in the hole that Ryker's in."

"No," said Deacon Bottle softly. "I didn't forget that."

Brailsford stepped back, smiling. "Sorry to bother you then, of course—if you're sure."

Deacon Bottle was not smiling. "Dead sure," he replied. . . .

WHILE the gray-stubbled head of the wizened Doc Enley bent over the figure of Emil Ryker, Deacon Bottle talked to Sheriff Enoch Starling in a whisper.

"How about it, Enoch? You figger Emil had a hand in it?"

Starling jerked impatiently at his long mustache. "Damned if I know, Deacon. I'd swear he had, from the look of it. He's got a story—but hell, it can't be proved."

"Talked to you about it, did he?" demanded the Deacon sharply.

"Some," acknowledged the sheriff. "Yesterday. They knocked over the stage first thing yesterday morning, remember. Well, Ryker claims he ran into the skunks that done the job. He's got a horse an' wagon—you've seen it—an' he makes the rounds of the ranches ever' so often, doing fancy ironwork. Yesterday mornin' he was sleeping out under the wagon. He woke up, he says, to find some gent pokin' a gun barrel in his ribs. Seems there was four-five of 'em in the gang, but they worked it so's Ryker couldn't get a look at 'em. One of their broncs had lost a shoe, an' that bein' pretty tough country, they made him put one on."

"An' Ryker never saw 'em?"

"So he says. Claims they had an iron against his spine an' a sack over his head most of the time. Well, he guessed they'd been up to some deviltry, he says, so he drove the nails in slaunchwise. So's he could spot the shoe later, y'understand. When it was done they tied an' blindfolded him an' lit out. Soon as he could get loose he come back here to tell me about the shoe. Turned out, though, that it didn't help none. What with rain an' all, there wasn't a mark left."

Deacon Bottle looked up slowly. "Maybe that explains the horseshoe brand on his chest. Warnin' to others. They heard he'd marked the shoe, an' were afraid he'd maybe see 'em, too. So they tried to kill him."

"Look at it the other way, too," growled Starling. "The yarn about shoein' one of their broncs is maybe a stall. In that case, he was in with 'em. He got cold feet, or they double-crossed him. When he heard about the reward—"

"Reward?" interrupted the Deacon.

The sheriff nodded. "Lew Brailsford made out a check for a thousand dollars an' left it at the bank for the man who cuts down the gang. Ryker heard about it an' figgered to clear his own skin, or get back at them who'd crossed him. He knew there was an odd shoe in the bunch an' told me about it. Then there's the bill from the robbery. A two-dollar bill. Where'd he get that?"

Deacon Bottle shook his head in perplexity. But the pudgy hand in the pocket of his black frock coat was touching the dirty slip of paper with the words *"I need help bad"* written on it. . . .

DOC ENLEY straightened and fumbled nervously with his nose glasses. "He'll pull through," he predicted, and then added pointedly, "if he's left alone. Come along to the office, Starling, and I'll give you some more salve for that burn."

Enoch Starling and the doctor went out, locking the door behind them, and Deacon Bottle drew his chair over by the bunk. He said, "Emil," softly, and the blacksmith's eyes opened.

He stared past the Deacon around the room, and then his harried gaze centered on the Deacon's round face. "Heard you talkin'," he whispered brokenly. "Didn't want—nobody else here. Starling told you 'bout—the shoe, an' all?"

"Most of it, Emil. I kind of reckoned you hadn't told him all."

"Couldn't tell him — Deacon. He wouldn't have believed me. I seen that shoe—again, Deacon. When I come back to Latigo. The bronc Lew Brailsford was ridin'—had it. Nails—drove in slaunchwise. I ain't good at—actin', Deacon. He could tell I knew he was one of 'em. They got me last night—in the shop—to keep

me from talkin'. But Deacon—nobody'll believe that Lew Brailsford—" His voice trailed off weakly.

Deacon Bottle bent closer to him. "That two-dollar bill, Emil? How'd you get that?"

"Found it in my pocket—for puttin' on the shoe. Brailsford must have . . . . Deacon, he'll get me—sure as hell now. If he does, Deacon—I got a wife an' kids—in St. Louis. If—I go under, Deacon—"

Emil Ryker's eyes closed wearily. The effort of talking had driven him back into unconsciousness again.

Deacon Bottle got up slowly. He believed Ryker. The blacksmith was a simple, hard-working man; there were no other characteristics to distinguish him, but he was honest. And he was right about Lew Brailsford. No one would believe that Brailsford was connected with the grisly crime. The Deacon fingered the note in his pocket, remembering what Brailsford had said: "It's mighty dangerous lining up with a man in the hole that Ryker's in!"

The Deacon's pink and moonlike countenance hardened. After all, nothing could be proved against Brailsford. It was guesswork. And Emil Ryker was nobody. If the Deacon interfered now, he would be risking the position of respect which he had struggled so hard to win in Latigo. If Emil Ryker were to go under, no one would be the wiser; no one would know that Deacon Bottle might have helped him—but had not. Harshly the Deacon told himself that there was not one chance in a hundred of pinning the crime on Brailsford. He was damning himself by accepting Emil Ryker's hopeless cause.

Then the Deacon sighed gustily. The blacksmith was innocent, and he had asked for his, the Deacon's, help. He would get it, such as it might be.

When Starling returned, the Deacon muttered an excuse about an errand to be done, and left. The fury of the town was still evident as he stepped into the street. It was a brooding thing, that fury, which chilled by reason of its very intangibility.

Deacon Bottle turned out of the street he was on and began to stride ponderously toward the better residential district. He had not covered a block when the sharp spat of a rifle cracked through the chill air. The lead ripped his black hat and chunked into a board wall on his right. The Deacon whirled toward the sound as he ducked into a gap between buildings. He whipped out one of the silver-mounted guns, cocked it with his thumb. There he crouched, his mild blue eyes probing hotly over the opposite line of windows. A faint rasping sound and a flicker of movement penetrated to him as a window in a vacant store was closed.

Deacon Bottle shrugged. The man with the rifle would be out the back and away before he could be reached. The Deacon slipped his gun back into leather, headed again for Brailsford's. The house was one of the more pretentious in Latigo.

BRAILSFORD stood with his back to the fireplace, a glass of whiskey in his hand. "Just a joke, probably," he commented. "You're not a hard man to miss, Deacon, if a fellow really was trying for you."

"A joke," murmured the Deacon, "or a warning."

Brailsford smiled genially. "Take it any way you like, Deacon. More whiskey?"

While his glass was being filled again, the Deacon, deep in a heavy leather chair, scrutinized his host calmly. He was certain that it was Brailsford who had arranged the attempted bushwhacking—and that it had not been merely a warning. He was equally certain that Brails-

ford understood that Ryker had told of the tell-tale shoe he had seen on the streets of Latigo. Brailsford, in spite of his power and assurance, was afraid of the Deacon.

Deacon Bottle was waiting irritatingly for the other to make the play, and Lew Brailsford made it. "I understand," he suggested, "that you've set your mind on a church here in Latigo, Deacon?"

Struck by a surprise which his face did not betray, the Deacon said, "That's right. Only I'm broke, an' it's a hard thing to take away poor folks' money to build one."

Brailsford frowned lightly. "I admire you for trying, Deacon. A shame it can't be put through. Such worthy efforts get all too little support from the men who could afford to help."

The Deacon took a long drink. "Most of 'em ain't so sure it's worthy," he contributed.

"Perhaps. Personally, Deacon, I would be prepared to do what I could."

There was no mistaking his meaning. The Deacon looked steadily at him. Lew Brailsford—tall, sharp-featured, handsome, sleek in dark suit and white collar—smiled back affably. A rough refusal rose in Deacon Bottle's throat, but he checked it. As he surveyed Brailsford, he judged keenly that the offer was more than bribery. Lew Brailsford was the type of man who trusted no one. In the Deacon's case, bribery would be only a temporary measure. The Deacon looked beyond for the permanent benefit which would accrue to Brailsford—and found it.

But he said piously, "Gifts to the Lord bring their own reward."

"Of course. Say, two thousand dollars?"

"A right nice little church could be built for that."

Lew Brailsford stepped to a wall safe, twirled the dial, and came back. In his hand was a thick packet of twenties. He brushed through them tantalizingly as he stood before the Deacon.

"Naturally, Deacon, I shall wish to remain anonymous in the matter. Any acclaim for a thing so easily done—and shall we say so necessary, Deacon?—would only embarrass me."

"Sure," agreed Deacon Bottle.

Lew Brailsford chuckled. "Even if, through the best of motives, you should betray my confidence and say that I had contributed the money, I would probably deny it flatly. I can count on you, Deacon?"

"Not a word to anyone, Brailsford, unless you decide to spill it yourself."

Brailsford threw back his head and laughed heartily. "No chance of that. I hate that kind of publicity too much. Here's the money, Deacon. I wish you luck with it."

OUT in the street Deacon Bottle felt of the wad of currency under his coat. His bridges had been burned behind him when he took it. He was risking his reputation and his life. Though he had had no opportunity to check the numbers of the bills, he was unshakably certain that the two thousand dollars was part of the currency shipment which had been stolen. The money was his death warrant, but a glimmer of a plan had impelled him to take it. No routine measures would trap Brailsford. He had protected himself too well.

But as he rolled along the walk toward Ryker's cabin, Deacon Bottle told himself bitterly that he was a fool. With the town goaded to a pitch of swift murder, no one would stop for explanations if the word broke that he was in on the deal with Emil Ryker.

Hoofs clamored in the street behind him. Half a dozen grimly silent riders unknown to the Deacon swept past him

at a hammering gallop. There was a relentless threat about their compactness, their silence. Riders were stirring, too, in other parts of the town. Over Latigo rose a disturbed, disquieting murmur.

There were men lounging in front of Ryker's cabin when he got there. As he went up to the door, one of them called warningly, "There's no decent men got business with Emil Ryker, Deacon!"

Enoch Starling unbarred the door for him, barred it again when he was in. There was sweat on the sheriff's forehead. His rugged face was drawn and tight.

"Hell's unwindin', Deacon," he snapped. "There's a Danville posse in town—callin' theirselves a posse, anyhow. They got their hog-legs oiled an' they're talking fight. Aim to gun me out of here an' hook Ryker to a tree." The look on the Deacon's plump face cut through Starling's concentration, and he bit out, "What's eatin' you, Deacon?"

Deacon Bottle rummaged in his inner pocket, held out a sheaf of currency. "Recognize them, Enoch?"

The sheriff's eyes bulged as he traced the serial numbers. He snatched the bills and crumpled them in a gaunt fist. "Hell, yes! Deacon! You didn't—?"

"Not me, Enoch. But the gent who engineered the robbery an' prob'ly did the killin' gave 'em to me."

Starling's demand came with strident tautness: "Who was it?"

Deacon Bottle's shoulders lifted. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Enoch." The Deacon stood straight and stiff under Enoch Starling's driving inspection. He had banked on Starling's friendship, his square dealing. This was as vicious a crisis as had ever come between them. On Starling depended the success or failure of his reckless plan.

Starling said gruffly, "What is it you're getting at, Deacon?"

Noncommittal as the words were, the tone told Deacon Bottle what he wanted to know. "Ryker's hands are clean," he stated quietly. "His story is straight. If I wasn't sure before, I am now. . . . The man that gave me this money claimed he was doing it so I could build a church. That was hog-wash. He wanted me to be caught with money from the robbery so the mob would put me out of the way along with Ryker. If I claimed I got it from him, he'd deny it—an' his word would stand!"

"Knowing that," grumbled Starling, "why in hell did you take it?"

"Because this gent can't be touched legally. You'd laugh, an' Latigo'd laugh if I named him. But Enoch—in the next hour or so, word is goin' to be spread that I helped Ryker with the stick-up an' that I've got some of the money. Find the man that starts that talk an' you'll find the man you want."

Enoch Starling let out an explosive breath. "Cripes, Deacon! You're playin' tag with a hang-rope. Even if it works out like you say, there ain't evidence in it to take to court."

"I ain't through yet," the Deacon objected. "This is one case that don't fit in a court. By the time that word gets out I'll be gone from here. Then is when your part of it comes in, Enoch." The Deacon drew a long breath and went on. "You'll make a speech to those boys out in front—there's Danville gunnies among 'em—an' you'll tell 'em that Emil Ryker has confessed!"

"Confessed!" blurted the sheriff. "You just said he was innocent."

"Right now," the Deacon snapped, "St. Peter himself couldn't convince that moose-hungry crowd that Ryker's clear. If you tell 'em Ryker's set to talk as soon as he's strong enough, they'll believe it! If they think Ryker's goin' to name the rest of the mangy crew that did the murdering, they'll leave him alone. The neck-

tie bunch from Danville will lie back, but there's one outfit that won't! The gents that think Ryker may have seen 'em while he was shoeing that bronc! They tried to kill him once. They'll make another stab at it."

Starling objected to that with a shake of his head. "Not with me here an' the mob against 'em, they won't."

"You won't be here. You'll be hitting for the hills, lettin' it out that you're going to run me down. Leave Doc Enley here with Emil—to keep him alive until he can talk. You circle around an' come back here."

"Suppose they make their try 'fore I get back."

"I'll be here," said Deacon Bottle. "Leave the back door unlocked."

Sheriff Enoch Starling didn't say the obvious thing then. He didn't say that he stood to lose his job and his reputation as a lawman if the Deacon had guessed wrong. His voice was husky: "It's you that'll be takin' the chance, Deacon. If this don't work out, you'll have that charge hanging over you; even if it does, you'll more'n likely get a slug in you."

Deacon Bottle walked over to the bunk and looked down at the stocky, bandaged figure of the blacksmith. But it was the man's wife and children in St. Louis he was thinking of. He turned back to Starling. "I reckon," he said, "I better be pushing along. Give 'em your talk when you think the sign is right, an' don't wait too long after dark to get back."

Starling's answer was toneless. "God knows what'll come of it, Deacon, but I'll do it."

DEACON BOTTLE got his mount from the livery stable and, careful to have his going unobserved, headed for the North Hills. Plunged in gloomy thought, that ride was a miserable one for the Deacon. If any one of the many things went wrong, he was a lost man. If he had misread Brailsford's intent, the whole project would be futile, and Starling would bear the brunt of its failure. And he was doing it for Emil Ryker, who was too unimportant to matter to anyone but Deacon Bottle.

The hours of the afternoon filed past into obscurity. Squatting on his heels in the lee of a canyon head, Deacon Bottle checked by his silver watch the events he calculated were transpiring in Latigo. Now Lew Brailsford would be spreading the word that he, Deacon Bottle, had been one of the robbers who had murdered the driver and guard and the two women. Now Sheriff Enoch Starling would be talking to the Danville men and the citizens of Latigo. Now Starling would be leaving, ostensibly to take up the Deacon's trail.

Dusk crept down, and Deacon Bottle climbed into the saddle once more, spurred at a lope back toward Latigo.

He tethered his mount before he reached the outskirts, and went into town on foot, employing every device of caution he had learned in many years of skirmishing with the law. Between outlying buildings, down dark alleyways he made his way, alert for trouble.

It came abruptly, slashing out of the dark. A voice bellowed: "Who's there!" The Deacon froze, hoping that the cry was not intended for him. He heard the slogging thud of boots, running toward him. Instantly he crouched and ran. The voice yelled: "Stop, damn you!" A shot hammered back the folds of quiet. Ahead of the Deacon a light stabbed through the night from the back of a house.

Before the Deacon could check himself he was framed in the spread of dim illumination. The voice bawled hysterically: "By God, it's Deacon Bottle! Gun him!"

The Deacon whirled and dodged away.

The back door of the lighted house was hurled open. From there a sixgun began to yammer spitefully.

There was suddenly a smashing onslaught of pain below the Deacon's waist. He felt himself pitching down obliquely, crashing into the side of a building. He rolled half under the elevated floor boards of the cabin, lay there panting, trying to rally his senses.

"There he goes!" the voice screeched. More guns pounded out thunder there in the dark. There was a confusion of shouts, the roaring of sixguns, and crunching boots which leaped past the Deacon and on into the night's obscurity.

Teeth locked, Deacon Bottle fought to get up. The first move told him that the bullet had broken his leg above the knee. He sank back, and the thought which was in him like bitter poison was that Emil Ryker would be killed in his bunk without a chance.

ONE guess of the Deacon's had been correct. Lew Brailsford had spread the word. He had done his work too well, and Deacon Bottle's way to the Ryker cabin was blocked. The Deacon swore in a harsh, unrelenting whisper. Emil Ryker was lying on his bunk—unguarded because the Deacon had wished it so. Now he was doomed!

Deacon Bottle pulled himself a few inches, dragging the bad leg. There would be a few precious seconds before his attackers realized that he was down, and came back to hunt him out. A groan he could not stifle forced its way to the Deacon's lips. The aching hurt of his leg made his head reel. Each tiny move seemed to bring jagged irons biting into his flesh.

Dragging the leg, he crawled on. He could hear the howl of the hunt sweeping back to where he had fallen. Then the bleak torture he was enduring blurred his thoughts.

Deacon Bottle crawled on. . . .

Some fiercely battling instinct he was not conscious of brought him at last to the cabin he sought. He lifted himself over the single step at the back, pushed at the door. It swung inward, and he pulled himself through the opening.

Voices from the front of the cabin registered dimly on his eardrums: "Enley! You there, Doc? Come on quick! There's a gent down at the Desert Eagle been stabbed twice in the guts. For God's sake, hurry!"

"Sure. Sure. Don't get excited. I'll come." That would be the nervous Enley, drawn away adroitly.

A door banged shut. Through the Deacon's pain drove a shaft of exultation. He was in time. On his stomach he pulled himself into the forepart of the cabin. There was a thin trail of blood on the floor behind him. Emil Ryker hauled himself weakly up on one elbow. "Deacon! In the name of—!"

Deacon Bottle checked him. He tossed one of the silver-mounted guns onto the bunk, kept the other in his left hand. "They'll be comin' in a minute—give 'em hell," he croaked.

The Deacon got hold of the table, jerked himself up. He picked up the lamp. Tramping boots outside swung into a rush for the door. The doorknob rattled and the panel surged in. Deacon Bottle threw the lamp. The light faded, then out of the crash of glass sprang an exploding flame.

The Deacon's gun roared sharply, and the first man across the threshold plunged face down into the flames. For a moment the doorway was choked with struggling bodies. Emil Ryker's gun was coughing from the bunk. Gun flame darted through the oily smoke from the shattered lamp. Hearing the crashing

pandemonium but dimly, Deacon Bottle, sprawled under the table, threw his next shot with care. He was aiming for the sharp-featured, handsome face of Lew Brailsford. The bullet struck, battered Lew Brailsford back and down, his arm flinging wide.

The shooting stopped suddenly, but the gun echoes still rang in the room. Two men of the five who had charged into the cabin fought to get out. His gun hand gone limp, Deacon Bottle heard faintly the stentorian bellow of Enoch Starling from out in the street. . . .

SHERIFF ENOCH STARLING came into the Deacon's hotel room and surveyed his friend critically. Deacon Bottle's leg was bandaged in splints, but his round face was beaming.

"Doc said I could see you," Starling grunted. "He said you were lucky to be alive, but if he knew what I do, he'd call it a miracle." The sheriff tugged reflectively at his mustache. "I thought I was gone too," he growled, "after I'd dragged you an' Emil out of that cabin. The crowd wanted to lift my scalp along with yours. I talked to 'em some, but they was hell-bent on not believing me. They wasn't convinced till we'd pulled Brailsford's house apart an' found the money from the robbery cached there. Then, by golly, they was all for makin' you out a hero. A hero, by God—an' you with no more respect for the law than a jackrabbit!"

Starling fumbled in his pocket, drew out a check. "Brailsford's check for a thousand is still good, Deacon, an' folks is bound that you're to have it. For that church of yours, you know."

Deacon Bottle shook his head sadly. "I'd sure like it, Enoch, an' it'd be a fine help to the Lord's work, but I can't take it. Emil Ryker did more than I did, an' he won't be able to work for a while. He's got a wife an' kids in St. Louis that need it a heap more'n I do. . . . By the way, Enoch, did the money check out all right? I mean—you found all of it?"

"Well, most of it. There was that fifteen hundred you gave me that Brailsford gave you—"

"Yeah. Fifteen hundred," agreed the Deacon placidly.

"Then with what we found at Brailsford's we're only five hundred short. Somebody's got it or it's been spent—no tellin'."

Deacon Bottle's pudgy hand strayed to the breast pocket of his black frock coat, in which reposed a neat packet of twenty dollar bills. "It's sure a shame," he remarked sorrowfully. "What with the gang rounded up an' all, folks'll get tired of lookin' at the numbers on bills, an' the rascal that took it will most likely get off scot-free."

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HELL'S DRIFT

by William F. Bragg

(Author of "Buffalo Bend's Big Night," etc.)

With a posse on his trail and his head bounty mounting, Brazos Red could run away no longer. For a man had mistreated his horse, and Red's code made him stay to fight it out—though it plunge him into a range war with all the odds against him.

FOR TWO long dusty miles, Brazos Red rode grimly silent down Bitter Creek. His gray horse was tired to the bone, half mad from the thirst of long trailing through a dry badland country. There was water not ten paces distant. The pony broke stride often, looked toward it, nickered deep down in its parched throat. But it looked across glittering strands of barbed wire. And over occasional wooden signs that hung from cedar posts—signs that had hardened Red's lean jaw and put that fighting light in his eyes.

NO TRESPASSING. MAN OR BEAST.
THIS MEANS YOU.
BY ORDER OF THE COURT.

In the first mile of that doleful ride, Red passed a half dozen gaunt cattle. He saw cows with wobbly-legged calves at heel. They were lowing mournfully, and he knew that they had come also from those drybone hills to the east where buffalo grass had blown away in the great drought and no early snows had come to provide stock water.

But Red was a man who respected the law, for it had pursued him over a thousand hard miles from New Mexico with a warrant for first degree murder. It had placarded the country with reward notices offering five thousand dollars, dead or alive, for the man who'd bring him in. Law-riders had swarmed after Red like

FENCE

A Brazos Red Novelette

bald-faced hornets from an overturned hive. So he had learned in lonely rides and dangerous camps to respect the law—but not to love it. Hence, although his pony was thirsty and ready to fall over, Red stayed this side of the new wire fence that barred off life-giving water.

At the end of two miles, his gray checked, faltered, then went down on its knees. A gallant pony, the cayuse scrambled up in an instant, even possessed spirit enough to snort and try a little pitching, for when a horse fell, the rider generally woke it up with a quirt end or a prod of steel spurs.

Brazos Red forgot that he was a hunted man, that it should be his play to stay out of sight, head north, forget mercy toward dumb brutes like horses. But this gray had carried him over many a tough stretch, galloped ahead of vengeful bullets from Raton Pass to the Dry Cheyenne, and Red could not hurt it now.

Red slid from leather, went to the fence and knocked out a couple of staples. He let down the sagging wires, weighting them on the ground so that his horse could step across without tangling up in the barbs.

Then he led the shuffling gray down to

Bitter Creek. And a grin came over his lean, lantern-jawed face and a softer look into his hard blue eyes as the pony lowered its head and drank. Gently the New Mexican patted the dusty neck and muttered:

"Ol' hoss! When a feller's thirsty, what's an order of the court?"

The stream wasn't ten feet wide. Perhaps in a normal year it would have been a lusty young river. But throughout Wyoming, the rains had been lacking all summer. And now—with late Fall snows due—there were only black clouds piling up along the mountain divides. Water therefore was precious and Red understood the meaning of bright barbed wire that barred suffering animals from drink. He understood well enough—but didn't approve!

TWO riders broke cover from the thin growth of willows across the stream. They had reached the creek bank, and the leader's horse was in the water before Red looked up. It was no part of the New Mexican's code to allow close approaches.

He stepped away from the gray, and his right hand dropped toward the wooden stock of the Colt six-gun slung from his sagging belt.

"Hello," he offered mildly, keen eyes appraising the strangers.

"Hello, yourself," said the leader. "What in hell you doin' over the line?"

"What line?"

"That fence line."

Red grinned, slapped his gray on the neck.

"Givin' this cayuse a needed drink," he explained. "I rode a couple miles figurin' I'd find a water-gap. But none showed up. The hoss like tuh played-out on me. So I let down a coupla wires. An' here we be."

The man who questioned him—a dark, stocky rider with a line of thick black brow running above his eyes and a brushy mustache of the same color above a trap mouth—flipped back his coat. A silver star glittered on his vest.

"Well," he grunted, "consider yourself under arrest."

"Arrest?"

"Can't yuh read? There's a sign every quarter mile. Put there by order of the court. Barrin' trespassers."

"Hell, man, I jest come here to give this hoss a drink. I've told yuh why—"

"This country's had enough of you dang range hogs. The day's gone when cowpunchers can cut wires and ride roughshod over folks' property. I control all this range along Bitter Creek. I put up the money to string a legal fence. The court's backin' me up. They even made me a special deputy. So—I'm takin' you to town to answer a contempt charge."

Going to town wasn't part of Red's immediate plans. He felt certain that if he did, some pesky sheriff, perhaps this newly fledged deputy with the shoe-brush whiskers, would dig up that reward notice giving full details about Red even unto the dimple in his right cheek which wasn't a beauty mark but had been put there by a bullet. No, Red decided instantly that he couldn't go to town just now, not even under arrest. But he was reluctant to discuss it. A trifling argument in New Mexico had put him to riding the long trail, and had compelled him to hit the trail north.

"Friend," he pointed out in his soft, southwestern drawl which had misled many hard men because of its very softness, "I told yuh I wasn't trespassin'. Jest givin' a drink to a played-out hoss. Now if water costs anything on this range—" he hesitated, and felt foolish at thinking the time had come when dumb brutes must pay for drink in the buffalo grass country. "If it costs anything, I got a

little change in my pocket. A dollar or so. Name yore damage—"

The black-browed rider spurred his pony deeper into Bitter Creek. His follower, a lanky specimen with a day's growth of curly yellow beard on his pointed chin, hung back for Red didn't appear the sort to crowd. A man gets to looking that way when he has slept on the ground for months, lived on cold bacon and black coffee, charred his boot heels kicking new heat into old fires, and worn his gloves to greasy ribbons handling rawhide bridle reins over hundreds of hard miles.

"Moxie," the yellow-whiskered man called. "Take the money an' let him go. He looks like a stranger to me."

"Stranger nuthin'," growled Moxie. "He's some gunfighter that ol' Bill Dale has hired fer his Seventy-Seven spread, to cause me more trouble along this fence line."

Red cut in. "Never heard of Bill Dale or the Seventy-Seven in my life. I'm a stranger here. An' hopin' to stay one. Here's a dollar for a drink. "He pitched the coin across Bitter Creek, and it fell on the sandy bank. "Take that an' call it quits. I don't want trouble with yuh."

Moxie puffed up like a big bullfrog. "I'm a special officer!" he boomed. "An' yo're under arrest for contempt of court. Put up yore hands!"

THEY stood not ten paces apart. Red was caught flat-footed by the side of his gray. Not for a moment had he expected a gunplay over so trifling a matter as cutting a fence to water a horse. In fact, he hadn't cut it. And now, like a flash of lighting, here was gunplay.

A Colt had jumped into Moxie's big right hand. And even as the special deputy bawled the command for surrender, the long barrel swept down into line on Brazos Red's middle shirt button.

Red broke at the knees. Even as he dropped, he raked out his artillery.

Moxie's gun roared. The bullet whipped over Red's head.

Then the New Mexican's weapon flamed. The bullet, striking the creek surface in front of Moxie's pony, flung muddy water into the pony's face. Rearing in fright, the cayuse almost flung Moxie into Bitter Creek.

Red had no desire to prolong this battle. He had watered his pony, apologized for seeming contempt of court, paid the tariff. As a receipt he had been handed a softnosed bullet. The fence was open. The brown hills beckoned. Red whirled to mount and ride.

As the New Mexican put a boot-toe in to the swinging left stirrup, Moxie checked his plunging horse, fairly lifted the startled animal up from the creek with ripping spurs. He saw Red's attempt to mount and flee. His gun roared a second time.

The gray went down with its head in the muddy shallows of Bitter Creek. It had carried Brazos Red the last long mile.

Moxie's big voice boomed with triumph. In killing the gray he had certainly barred escape to Brazos Red. With his yellow-bearded henchman as aid, the arrest would be simple.

The fall of the gray flung Red away. But he retained his grip on his Colt. He came up on his lean hams. And now there wasn't a mild look in his eyes nor softness in his voice.

"Will you be good now?" roared Moxie. And even grinned under his big mustache as he asked the jeering question.

"Good?" snarled Brazos Red. "I paid yuh off in silver. If that don't go, I'll make good with lead!"

This time he shot to kill. And only the swift dig of Moxie's spurs saved the man from the whining bullet that cut a saddle string off his hull.

Blind with rage, uncaring of consequences, Brazos Red squatted in the sand alongside his dead pony. His hand shook as he lined his hot gun for another try. He had never hated a man but he knew now the choking baffled wrath that hate puts into a man's mind and heart. If he could but kill this Moxie, then what followed would not matter to Brazos Red.

The yellow-whiskered man saved Moxie for the moment. When his boss came tearing out of Bitter Creek on a half mad horse that was lashed with hot lead, this tobacco-chewing henchman lifted the long rifle that was balanced across his saddle-fork.

Red, eyes on Moxie, failed to note the rifle.

The yellow-haired man creased Red's right shoulder as calmly as if he were putting a bullet through a bull elk. The six-gun flew from the New Mexican's hand. He went down for even a bullet that only cuts the skin carries a terrific shock.

Then was Moxie's chance to do murder. For the New Mexican lay on the sand, spent and helpless.

But the rifleman shouted. "Riders comin', Moxie! Hold yore fire!"

Even as Red sat up and groped blindly for his six-gun, two men quirted their lathered horses through the gap in the wire fence. They drew rein alongside him.

"Moxie!" one barked. "Are yuh so danged locoed over this fence that yo're committin' murder?"

Moxie, caught with a gun in his right hand, and an apparently wounded man under it, sputtered that he was a special deputy, that the man by the dead gray had resisted arrest.

The rider who had called him to account—a grizzled man with a hay-colored mustache under his long nose and a big adam's apple in his scrawny, turkey-red neck—spurted tobacco juice into Bitter Creek.

"Damn yore contempt of court," he said. "This man's a plumb stranger. If you itch fer gunplay, why don't yuh hunt up ol' Bill Dale or some of us Seventy-Seven boys? Try goin' to town with us."

"I will," swore Moxie, "if I catch yuh cuttin' fences. You know well, Sands, that the law's back of me."

"You don't own this range. It's held by homesteaders an' none of 'em have proved up yet."

"They've appointed me their agent. I'm glad to help men out that you bullyin' cowmen are tryin' to run off the range. I've staked 'em to money for this drift fence. An' I'm man enough to see that it stays up."

The rider who had come up with the Seventy-Seven veteran now interrupted. He was a cool-eyed lad with a blond cowlick and a clean lift to his jaw.

"Moxie," he said quietly. "I don't think the court aims for you to go so far as killin' strangers over a wire fence."

Moxie's big mouth gaped. "You," he gasped. "Why dang you, Idaho, I figured *you* was playin' my game. You got a homestead out there in the hills. This fence is yore protection. Yet here yuh sit alongside ol' Ringbone Sands, talkin' up for these hoggish cow outfits. What's come over yuh?"

"A man can take up a homestead," said Idaho, "an' yet try to play the game decent. There was no call for you to kill a thirsty hoss or knock over a pilgrim."

"Idaho," Moxie stated grimly. "I won't fergit this."

"Suit yoreself," the boy answered indifferently.

But now Brazos Red took a hand in the game. His right shoulder felt stiff and the raw crease burned like fire. But he could balance a six-gun in his left hand.

"Gents," he told Ringbone and Idaho.

"I appreciate yore kind words. But I'm the one who should finish this up. So if you'll excuse me—"

"Where you goin'?" barked old Ringbone.

"I aim to wade the crick," said Red. "It don't look hip deep to a tall Injun. An' when I git on the other side, I figure to take me a scalp. A black one—"

He staggered into the water.

MOXIE grinned and waited. It was apparent that Brazos Red was about out on his feet. Moxie slowly raised his gun. No court would hold him to account. The New Mexican had stated his quarrel and gone to war.

But young Idaho spurred his horse past Red and flung the animal broadside to protect the wounded man. He held a gun on Moxie and looked down the sights.

"Moxie," he stated evenly. "If you don't make yoreself scarce—you an' yore yaller-chinned pal—me an' Ringbone will shore go to war."

Red tried to stand up. "It's my fight," he argued. But argument seemed wasted on Idaho and Ringbone when they saw Red's dangling right arm.

"Git outa here!" barked Ringbone. And jerked a buffalo gun from a rawhide saddle scabbard. "Split the breeze!"

"Yo're *all* in contempt of court!" brayed Moxie.

"Tuh hell with courts!" Ringbone shouted and he cocked his Sharps.

"Come on, Moxie!" cried the yellow-whiskered pal. "Ringbone's scatter gun kills at a mile. An' tears a hole in yuh big enough to drive a four-hoss wagon through. Come on!"

Before he took this sage advice, Moxie sized up young Idaho. And then, as his black glare passed over Brazos Red, a new gleam came into the beady eyes. For Bitter Creek water had washed the desert grime off Red's face.

"I'm damned," breathed Moxie. Then he snarled for Idaho's benefit. "I'm ridin' now. But I'll be back. Don't forget that."

He rolled his spurs. Old Ringbone howled like a hungry wolf. "Bring more with yuh when yuh come back."

They were kind to Red. He thanked them but argued that they should have allowed him to finish it with Moxie.

"Yore gun wing was busted," said Ringbone. "You wasn't in no shape."

"Not busted," said Red. "Just numb. A crease along the p'int of the shoulder. A half hour an' it'll be okay."

"Let me look at it," said Idaho.

And with the tail of his shirt, he strapped up the wound while Red chattered with Ringbone to keep from flinching. When a rider has gone without food and drink for a day and a night, he gets weak around the belt line and wobbly in the knees.

When Idaho finished his rough first aid, Red was a trifle pale around the gills. "Thanks," he said brokenly. He took a step forward, went to his knees.

"Hell," Ringbone said, voice full of concern, "yo're hurt purty bad somewheres. That skunk perforate yuh twice?"

"Naw," Red stood up and grinned. "But a Spanish supper—a takin' up of a notch in yore belt—it's apt to catch up with a man."

"Hell, you mean yo're *hungry?*"

It was unthinkable to Ringbone that a man should go hungry in the buffalo grass country.

"We're gatherin' cattle up the draw," he said. "Got a leetle camp. The boss is thereabouts. Ol' Bill Dale. Come with me. My hoss packs double."

"I'll shore spend one meal with yuh. Glad to meet up with gents like you an' Idaho."

But after Red had crawled up behind Ringbone's saddle, and the riders had pushed their ponies through the gap in

the wire, Idaho said briefly. "Be seein' you," and headed off into the back country.

"Don't he work for Dale?" Red asked.

Ringbone said sadly. "That boy don't dare to show within a mile of ol' Bill. An' I'll thank yuh—when you meet ol' Bill—not to mention that yuh met the kid."

CHAPTER TWO

Nesters at War

WHAT Ringbone called a camp was in reality an old-time beef spread hangout on a small stream that ran into Bitter Creek. Here stood a weatherbeaten cabin, pole corrals, a ramshackle barn, and out in the small field, three or four stacks of wild hay. Red had seen a hundred like it from Mexico north and it looked like home, for cattle was his regular business.

"It was a dang smooth snap," explained Ringbone, "until this Lumpjaw Moxie cut us away from outside range with his homestead gang."

"His homestead gang?"

"Shore. They're all dummy entrymen for Moxie but nobody can prove it. He pays 'em to file on six hundred and forty acres each. That's agin federal law but apparently Uncle Sam don't care. Moxie's gittin' away with it."

"What's his object?"

Ringbone pointed to the bare hills that surrounded the place. "There's outcroppings of coal in sight. Moxie's quite a promoter. A smart young feller once told me that the Seventy-Seven homestead would prove valuable some day because the patent carried mineral rights an' consequently who owned it would also be able to mine that coal."

"Mebbe so. But it takes a lot of folks an' factories to use up coal."

"Mebbe so," agreed Ringbone. "I wouldn't know. I'm jest a knot-headed cowpuncher. My line is cows. But around the Seventy-Seven we're jest about blowed-up on that." He sighed, shrugged, and looked toward the cabin. "Come on in. We can always eat while jack-rabbits is runnin'."

But Red dined on something better than jack-rabbit stew. A fat old cook, with a bald head and a right wooden leg, dished out fried beef and spuds, spotted pup pudding, and good old sheep-dip coffee. As Red shoved back his plate and rolled a smoke, the door opened and a tall old man pushed in. He wore a dingy sourdough coat and his hat was tied down over his ears with a red bandanna. Frost clung to his gray brows and longhorn mustache. And as the newcomer stood in the entry, drawing off his gloves and slapping his hands against his stiff chaps, those at the table heard the howl of the wind.

"Hell on the divides tonight," said the newcomer. "Looks like a blizzard within twenty-four hours. We got to ride early, Ringbone."

Then the tall man spotted Red. He stood in a grim and questioning silence until Ringbone made an introduction.

"Boss, meet a pilgrim that tangled today with Lumpjaw Moxie, an' that yeller-haired nester named Jakie Towers that pulls most of Moxie's crooked work. They about busted this pilgrim up because he opened that spite fence to water his hoss."

Then old Bill Dale's leathery face cracked into a smile and warmly he shook Red's left hand. For the right was still strapped to the New Mexican's side.

"Pilgrim," said Bill, "if you don't see anything you want on the Seventy-Seven, jest sing out an' mebbe we got it in the cellar."

Red grinned. "All I want," he ex-

plained, "is a hoss. This Moxie killed my plug."

"We kin shore fix you up. We're long on ponies an'—" Bill's smile faded, "short on cows an' range."

"I got a little money," said Red. "I can buy the hoss."

Bill frowned. "You in a powerful hurry to leave? I need help here on the Seventy-Seven with this blizzard due. Help me gather weak cows a couple days an' I'll pay you off with a hoss."

They hadn't asked him his name. That was western custom, the good old custom of not asking delicate questions. It cheered up Brazos Red. So that he decided to stay with Ringbone, old Bill, and the one-legged cook until his gun arm had healed. Then, well mounted, he would swing off the northern trail just long enough to locate Lumpjaw Moxie. And after that he'd take chances on reaching Canada.

"My right wing's on the blink," said Red.

"Shucks," Bill growled. "A cowpoke kin ride while his legs are good. Even when he's only got one leg—" he pointed out the cook. "You'd be surprised at ol' Peg thar'. He's got an ol' buckskin down in the corral that he tops off when me an' Ringbone can't handle all the work."

Then the picture came to Red as he sat there, and with it, some sadness. For he saw that by all the signs, this had once been a powerful spread with plenty of riders on the Seventy-Seven pay-roll and cattle by the thousands on the buffalo grass. Then had come the barbed wire, choking the beef off the natural feed and water. And so tonight, with a blizzard wind rattling the loose boards on the cabin roof, Bill Dale was staging a losing battle with two veterans to aid him—a one-legged cook, and faithful Ringbone who limped when he was off a pony.

"I'll do what I can for you, Mister Dale," said Brazos Red—and meant it to the heart!

THE three riders were out before daybreak in the face of a slashing wind. Peg, the cook, wished to ride but Dale refused.

"You stay here," he said, "an' watch this hay. About all we got left is weak cows. If we can put 'em on hay before they bog down in the blizzard, why mebbe the Seventy-Seven brand will live another year."

As a red October sun climbed above the cold blue eastern divide, Dale sent old Ringbone up a draw to locate stock.

"We'll make up the herd," he explained, "at the line-camp on Dog Soldier. About noon. Then ride like hell for the ranch. This storm's about due."

Red sided old Bill then up a barren divide where a man could see a big sweep of country. Here and there he spotted the shacks of the homesteaders and the long lines of fence strung across the sagebrush flats. They passed many scrawny cattle and ribby calves. And talk failed between them except for an occasional bitter curse from Bill Dale.

Then the old cattleman burst into speech as he checked his horse by the carcass of a yearling.

"A year back," he growled, "this critter was fat an' sassy. Follerin' his mammy around an' purty as a pitcher with white face an' stockin' feet. Now—he's coyote bait." Bill looked down into the basin below the divide.

Bill shook his head. "I'm about cleaned up," he confessed. "Five years back I run a thousand head of cattle. Five or six boys drew wages from me. Now I'm down to around a hundred head an' if they don't reach hay today, I'll be out of business tomorrow." Feeling overcame him for the moment, shook the old man as he fought for words. For Red seemed a

friend, but like most cattlemen, Bill Dale wasn't much of a talker. His fist beat his saddle-horn. The muscles stood out along the jut of his rigid jaw. Then he ended lamely. "I don't know *what* I'll do. All I know is how to run cows. For forty years, I've run cows."

So they rode on silently. One was an old man whose brave but deeply sunken eyes looked out on the ruin of a lifetime's labor.

The other was a New Mexican outlaw with a blood money reward on his head and a strapped-down gun arm. So they rode grimly into the slash of the blizzard wind. Rode until they reached a bold headland and the sharp crack of rifles stopped them.

Then old Bill Dale smiled, a grin of pure joy.

"Why, hell," he said softly, as he peered over the crest. "Damned if them nesters ain't started a private war. An' we're occupyin' a grandstand seat."

IN the hollow under the headland stood a homesteader's tar paper shack. Flames were running along the roof and black smoke rolled west, whipped by the wind. Red's quick gaze spotted three men spread around the burning cabin, planted behind rocks, and working rifles.

He heard the sound of an occasional return shot from the shack which informed him that the occupant was still alive and fighting for his life.

"But it won't be long," laughed old Bill Dale.

He stepped off his pony and squatted on the cold ground. He motioned to Red.

"Git down. Enjoy yoreself. Seein' that bob-wire crew turn to butcherin' each other is a sight for sore eyes. Damn all nesters anyway. I'm not the man to interfere with their fun."

"They got that hombre cornered up," Red observed. "Must be gittin' hot inside. He'll have to quit that shack soon."

"He'll come out on the run like a scairt wolf," said Dale. "Then they'll likely plug him for keeps."

Red was frowning. "Three agin one," he complained, "ain't fair."

Bill sniffed. "Nester odds," he said. "About Lumpjaw Moxie's speed."

Red sat straighter in his saddle. "If I thought Moxie was stagin' that show," he declared, "I might buy in."

Dale stood up and said savagely. "Yo're a cattleman. Let 'em fight. The more git killed off, the better for our cows."

"But three against one. An', Dale, while I'm thankin' you for feedin' me, an' offerin' me a show for a fresh hoss, same time I got a little account with Lumpjaw Moxie, an' that yaller-chinned Towers."

"Settle it when yore gun arm is healed. Right now, yo're jest half a man."

Then Dale's teeth clicked sharply. And Red bent over his saddle-horn, staring down into the hollow of death.

For the blazing roof had fallen in and a man had come out, much like the wolf described by old Bill. He came on the dead run with a six-gun in each hand. So gallant was his try for life that the three riflemen hurried their fire.

The lone nester raced ten feet away from his bonfire of a home. He was heading for a big rock that might save him from bullets.

A big man jumped up from behind a boulder on the slope. He flourished a gun, and Brazos Red heard the booming yell.

"Git the son of a gun!"

Recognizing that whoop, Red jumped his pony off the low rim, freed his six-gun with his left hand, and went plunging down toward battle.

Bill Dale howled. "Come back, you bat-headed fool!"

Red roared his defiance. "You come on! That's Lumpjaw Moxie."

But he didn't add that the nester who had popped from the burning shack was young Idaho. Ringbone had cautioned Red against telling of the boy's part in the fight with Moxie and Towers on Bitter Creek.

RED was halfway down the slippery slope, saddle leather popping and wall-eyed pony skidding a dozen feet at each lunge before Moxie turned and saw him. Then guns flamed. Red forgot that his right arm was sore. He wrenched it free of binding straps. A man needed both hands now.

Slugs whistled past the New Mexican. He grinned for his ride had turned the hostile fire away from Idaho. But the odds were with Lumpjaw Moxie and his two men. Red was on a horse and coming straight downhill in a series of pitches and slides.

"Take yore time," roared Lumpjaw Moxie. "An' git that redhead cold. It's wuth plenty money to us all."

Red heard that, knew that Moxie had recognized him sometime during the session on Bitter Creek as the high-priced fugitive.

"Come on an' collect!" he shouted.

He saw that Idaho had reached the sheltering rock. The boy went to work with both guns.

Then from the crest of the headland came a series of splitting reports. Red recalled that old Bill had borrowed Ringbone's buffalo before starting this morning's circle. The battle was joined.

But Lumpjaw Moxie wasn't the sort to stay and enjoy it. Horses were tied in the cedars that dotted the slope.

Idaho dropped one of the gang but Moxie and lanky Towers, of the yellow whiskers, reached the timber. They spurred out on the opposite side as Red turned on the space of a thin dime to flank them. They knew the trails, raced over a hogback with bullets kicking up gravel behind their horses.

Brazos Red cursed and reined down to a jog. He came up to where Idaho crouched behind his rock.

"Tough luck, boy," he greeted him. "Some day that Moxie will forget to run away."

Idaho stood up. He wiped the black grime off his face, dug the soot out of his red-rimmed eyes.

"Let's hope so," he said. "Anyway, you showed in time. I reckon I would never have reached the rock. They jumped me at daybreak, touched off the shack. Little visit that Moxie promised he'd make yesterday at Bitter Creek." Then Idaho looked up the face of the slope. "The feller with you, his gunwork helped to bust things up. His slugs was shore waltzin' right at Moxie's shirt tail. Who was it? Ringbone?"

The man in question arrived. The grin faded from Idaho's sooty face. He stepped back toward his smouldering shack. And to the amazed Red, it appeared this gallant lad was ashamed about something.

Then Red heard a choked snarl. It didn't sound at all like the voice of old Bill Dale.

"By the livin'," the cattleman gasped. "You—a nester!"

Idaho flung out pleading arms. "Dad, listen to me. Don't get me wrong."

Old Bill regained that iron control of feeling. "Why should I listen?" he rasped. "There's plenty of evidence. Yore shack. The fence." He turned toward Red. "Come on," he said. "Let's ride."

"Dad!" Idaho's young voice sounded like he was praying. "Dad—let me tell yuh."

"Go to hell," said old Bill Dale, and spurred up.

But Brazos Red flung his horse across the trail.

"That's a good boy," he said, "Yes-

terday he broke with Lumpjaw Moxie. He saved my life. Stay an' listen to him."

"Git that hoss outa the trail," Bill Dale said between his teeth.

CHAPTER THREE

Stampede

IDAHO'S pony was running in the small pasture back of the shack. Red caught it, and sat waiting while the boy cinched up his saddle. The wind had reached a high note, and the big round tumble-weeds were scudding across the flat. The clouds along the mountains had banked up until the peaks were hidden and there was a high gray fog in the air. Red shivered as he waited—for he knew the signs. . . .

"Kid," he said, "it ain't none of my business. But with a storm due, you should be out helpin' yore dad to round up his weak stuff."

The boy snapped the safety buckle, tried the latigo for luck. Then he turned and came over to the New Mexican. There was a set to his jaw and a light in his eye that had somehow wiped away that appearance of youth. Young Bill at this moment in every respect looked like a full-sized man.

"You heard him cuss me out?" he asked quietly.

"He cussed me too. An' mebbe with cause. For I had eaten his grub an' saddled his hoss. An' so I had no business to interfere between father an' son."

"It wouldn't have mattered," said Idaho. "Let me explain. You think I'm a nester. So does he. The same for Lumpjaw Moxie. Only Ringbone knows the real truth. An' until my job is finished, only Ringbone will know." He looked up at Red. "Not that I wouldn't trust you. But after all, yo're a stranger."

Red nodded. "What I don't hear," he said slowly, "don't hurt my feelin's."

"But you should hear this," the boy insisted. "My dad is an old-time cattleman. Until I got age on me, I rode range an' seemed cut out for the same job. Then I found there was a twist in my brain. My dad called it a queer twist. At first he laughed at me. So did the boys like Peg an' Ringbone."

"A twist?" Red asked.

"Yeah. I got to lookin' around at these big mountains an' funny rocks. I saw the cliffs standin' on their heads an' badland canyons with petrified bones stickin' from the mud walls. An' around the ranch were the coal outcrops and such. It made me curious, all this, and somehow I got hold of a book on geology. To sum it all up, I told my dad I wanted to go to school an' find out what it all meant."

Red grinned. "Down in the New Mexican minin' country," he jested, "you would have been called a rockhound."

"Up here," said Idaho, "my dad called me a darn fool an' told me to stay with cows."

"So you minded him like a good little boy?"

Idaho hung his head. "Four years ago," he said, "I headed for school. When I quit the ranch, my dad wouldn't say good-bye. I worked my way through, washin' dishes and the like. Graduated last spring. And —and got a job that brought me back home."

Red pointed toward the charred ruins of the shack. "Homesteadin' for Moxie?" he asked.

Idaho flushed under his grime. "That was part of the job," he said.

"You was sore at yore father. A kid way, mebbe, of gittin' even."

Idaho's jaw became prominent. His gray eyes—cold at times like those of old Bill—took on the frosty light.

"We owe somethin' to each other," he

snapped. "But let's go easy on how we talk."

"You was doin' the talkin'. You said homesteadin' was part of yore game."

"It is."

"Well then—"

Idaho turned away with a groan. "You got me cornered," he said. "I can't talk. Let's ride."

IDAHO led north along the trail that Moxie and Towers had taken. Bill Dale's pony had also made tracks there, Red noticed. He topped a windswept divide with Red close at his heels. He pointed off toward the northeast where the blizzard was gathering its fury.

"About ready to bust," said Idaho.

"Yeah," Red agreed. "An' yore ol' dad out roundin' up weak stock."

The New Mexican liked this boy. He admired the staunch father. He hoped that somehow he could bring them together. It looked like hard going. But if he accomplished it, then he could head for Montana with peace in his heart. For he owed much to both the Dales. So he studied the stiff, grim-faced boy and with careful words kept ever before him the picture of a grizzled man bringing starving cattle in from the hills to save them from the storm.

The wind cut through their heavy coats and leather chaps as they quartered down the opposite slope. The ponies flinched and wouldn't face it.

"Dog Soldier Creek," Idaho said finally, and checked his pony.

There was a thin gray mist in the air now. A rider couldn't see beyond a quarter mile. The smoke of the storm, that was cold as ice, hid the peaks.

But looking into the narrow valley, Red saw a string of feeble cattle slowly poking down the gulch. Two men rode with them. And Red recalled that Bill Dale had commanded Ringbone to meet him at noon on Dog Soldier.

"They have gathered their stock," Red said softly.

His right arm throbbed but a night's rest had renewed its strength. He felt fit enough to side the old-timers down in the gulch.

Idaho turned his horse, rode alongside the New Mexican.

"Kid," Red said gravely, "that's yore dad down there with his cattle. You can forget rock houndin' long enough to help him save the stock."

Misery twisted Idaho's face, shone in his eyes. "Stranger," he answered. "That fight staged on my shack by Moxie and Towers wasn't altogether because of you. There's a showdown due on this range. And so—so I got to quit you, and head for town."

"Boy, if you rode down and gave a hand with them critters, mebbe yore dad would forget you took up a homestead and run wire across his range."

"The time's past for me to help. There's a bigger job on. I—I *got* to head for town. It's a five mile ride, an' tough goin' with this wind on."

Red shrugged, tickled his pony with the spurs. "Suit yoreself," he said coldly. "Ride for town or any other place."

"Stranger—don't git me wrong. It isn't because my dad is sore. It's because—"

BUT Brazos Red was spurring down to where weak cattle straggled and two old men pushed them down the valley, hopeful that hay would be reached before the storm broke.

"It ain't often I'm wrong," Red said to old Ringbone when he reached the herd. "But I shore went wrong today."

"What on?" asked the old puncher.

"Well, I met that Idaho again. Found out it was Bill Dale's boy."

Ringbone pawed the icicles off his mustache. He grinned right cheerily. "A danged good lad," he observed.

Red stared at the veteran. "The hell you say," he gasped.

But before Ringbone could explain, old Bill rode up. He glared at sight of the New Mexican.

"You can have a hoss," he growled, "but yuh don't need to work for him."

Red said. "Don't get me wrong, Dale. I never aimed to quit you in the pinch."

"You interfered back there."

"I'm sorry about that. But let's forget it. You'll need plenty help to put these critters on hay."

Hollow-flanked, big-eyed, the cattle moved sluggishly down the valley. Here was sagebrush for shelter from the cutting wind that now carried a spit of snow. The weary longhorns would have preferred to linger, to huddle for warmth. But Old Bill Dale knew that once they halted, death would come in the blizzard. He rode the flanks, pelting his tired horse into new effort. He cussed out Ringbone, spurred Brazos Red to faster work.

"Keep 'em movin'!" Dale shouted. "On their feet. Once they stop—"

Saddle strings snapped in the wind that now held a bitter chill. A weak calf dropped out. An anxious mother halted, and stood nuzzling the little animal, and lowing mournfully. The lead of the herd slowed for cattle react instinctively to a call of distress from one of their kind.

Brazos Red checked by the calf but Bill Dale came riding out of the white mist that was heavy and blinding as smoke.

"Others will drop out," rasped Dale. "Don't let that stop yuh. Keep the herd movin'!"

"How far to hay?" asked Red.

"Another mile. But a damn long one. Longest we've rode in many a day."

Red looked down from his saddle at the weak calf, the old mother with a half dozen brands scarred on her gaunt sides. A soft look came into the New Mexican's eyes.

"Hell," he told old Bill. "This hoss can pack a calf that far."

A gust of stiffer wind, fore-runner of the blizzard, whooped down the draw. The chill struck through Red's clothing. It was as though a gigantic door to some mighty ice-box had been opened.

"Yo're likely to need that hoss right bad—an' pronto," growled Dale.

"I'll take chances."

"Suit yoreself." Dale turned back to the herd. But now the eyes under the slouchy hat brim weren't so grim and hard.

Red flung the calf over his saddle-fork. It was light as a feather, he thought, indicating short rations. The mother made a feeble rush but he was up in leather and warding her off with gentle slashes of his quirt.

"Back to the herd, mammy," he chided. "I'll take keer of yore child."

The cow refused to leave. As Red tailed the hospital bunch down Dog Soldier, she followed his horse, big eyes on the youngster across Red's saddle.

Ringbone emerged from the mist. His whiskers were frosty, and sleet clung to his bushy brows. But the old-timer was singing.

"For I want tuh be a cowboy and with the cowboys stand.
Bullhide chaps on my laigs an' six-gun in my hand."

"How far?" asked Red.

"A half mile. Keep shovin', an' singin'! They like it."

Red grinned with cracked lips. "My singin' would stampede even weak cattle."

A yearling staggered in the drags, stood humped of back a moment, then keeled over. Ringbone quit singing, stared from

the bogged animal to the calf on Red's saddle.

"Can't carry the hull herd," he whispered. "An' by the same token, a quick death's better than lettin' coyotes chaw 'em while they're still alive."

He jerked his six-gun, bent from his horse. Brazos Red went on with the mother cow still following. Now the New Mexican wasn't smiling. Behind him he heard the crack of a gun. Then Ringbone trotted past, and in silence.

If fences hadn't been strung to bar dumb brutes from feed and water, bullets today wouldn't be battering into the brains of yearlings. Red swung around and looked at the trailing cow.

"Mammy," he growled, "we'll go to hay, and hell can't stop us."

White sleet hid the lead where Bill Dale rode. Then progress slowed, finally halted. Red and Ringbone rounded the flanks to ascertain the cause.

The lead had halted with blunt noses touching tight strands of new barbed wire. And on the fence, a sign swung in the wind. . . .

NO TRESPASSING.
THIS MEANS YOU.
BY ORDER OF THE COURT.

THERE sat Bill Dale, white as a snow man from the sleet that clung to his clothing.

"This fence," he said grimly, "musta been run this mornin'. Real early. It closes the last trail into the ranch. Another hundred yards an' we'd hit the Seventy-Seven gate."

He swung down from his saddle. Old Ringbone followed suit.

"Boss," said the puncher. "Ol' judge told you it would be six months in jail next time you cut a fence."

"Git on yore hoss, Ringbone. I can stand six months in jail to save my cattle."

"But what will the outfit do with you in the jug? Be reasonable, boss. Let me cut the wire. I'm an ol' stiff. No good to anybody. A nice warm winter in jail would please me most to death."

Bill Dale's voice sounded choked and hoarse as he clapped Ringbone on the back.

"You ol' boxhead," he said. "A term in jail would kill yuh. But don't think I ain't thankin' yuh—"

But Ringbone turned and pulled pliers from his saddle-pocket. He cut the top wire. Bill Dale roared. "Pass them to me."

"Stay outa this, boss. Git on yore hoss. Looks like a trap fer the Seventy-Seven—"

"I'm stayin' here!"

Desperately, Ringbone began working on the second strand. Bill Dale sought to wrest away the pliers.

Brazos Red, forgetting the calf, swung in his saddle, eased his knee, and began to pull his carbine from its scabbard.

A shout cut through the roar of the storm.

"Git away from that fence. In the name of the law—"

Bill Dale snarled as he succeeded in jerking the pliers from Ringbone's half-frozen hands.

"To hell with yore law! I'm makin' room fer cows!"

"For the last time. Git away from that fence!"

"To hell with you—" Dale was panting, down on his knees, fighting to cut the wire that held his stock from hay.

Old Ringbone whirled to cover his boss. A rifle flamed in the white mist, bloomed like a yellow poppy. Ringbone fell, six-gun spinning from numb hands.

The bottom wire twanged. Lead cattle bawled, bunched together, began pushing toward the gap.

Bill Dale cast his pliers straight toward

the spot that hid the fence guard. Then he raked out a six-gun. He snarled defiance, bade the ambushers to come and get him.

Brazos Red spurred to the front, shouting. "Dale, git Ringbone on yore hoss! The cattle are comin' on! They'll tramp him to ribbons—"

Then Red spurred his pony through the fence gap, drove straight ahead. A bullet cut past his head. He jerked up his short rifle, fired at the sound. Another slug cut a concho from his chaps. He saw horsemen ahead, dim in the mist.

CHAPTER FOUR

Red Rides On

ABOVE the crack of guns, the roar of the gale, he heard the bawling of cattle. With a sure instinct, they knew this trail would lead to hay. Some of these wise old cows had often hung their heads over Seventy-Seven fences in winter waiting to be invited in. They came on, resistlessly. Hunger lent strength.

Red, leading the way, wondered whether Dale had saved Ringbone. Then another fence appeared ahead and he saw the gate was open.

"Seventy-Seven," he breathed. "Hay in sight!"

For out of the mist loomed a stack of wild feed.

A gun bellowed. Then the stack flared up like a giant roman candle. Sparks exploded. Masses of burning hay went tearing west in the drive of the wind. Somewhere a man was yelling for help.

Red dropped the calf. The mother mounted guard immediately.

"This far for you, kid," said the New Mexican. "Now it's a case of savin' yore mammy's grub."

Near the stack, he encountered the old cook. Peg was half mad. He shuffled around on his wooden leg, waving a buffalo gun, and shouting that Moxie and his gang had just invaded the ranch and touched off this stack.

"Two more nearer the house!" bawled Peg.

"Come on!" Red yelled.

As he galloped past the cook, a rifle snapped a bullet. The cook cursed and collapsed.

Brazos Red went on alone, rounded a stack, saw riders grouped in front of the ranch-house that stood not fifty yards away and toward the east.

He slid from his saddle, bounced to the ground, and crawled into the space between the stacks as the men around the house turned their horses and rushed him.

His carbine barked once—twice. A horse went over on its nose and a rider sprawled on the ground and lay in a heap like a bunch of dirty clothes. The others circled sharply, cut back to shelter, dropped from their ponies, and took cover around the house. Ponies, dragging bridle reins, tore across the field.

RED knew, as he dug in, between the stacks, that horsemen couldn't fire this hay while he held his ground. Grimly, he determined to stay until his ammunition played out. He wondered as to the fate of Bill Dale and Ringbone. The old cook had fallen. He was out of the battle.

But a score remained for Brazos Red to settle with this man, Lumpjaw Moxie. Moxie owed him for a horse. Also, any man who caused suffering to dumb brutes to gain his own ends, deserved to be killed off like a marauding coyote.

If Idaho were here now to stand up for his dad, the boy would be a help. But the kid had turned tail when the call came for a showdown. No time now to ponder over that. Kids didn't understand this

old-time cow stuff. The boy yearned to be a rockhound.

A bullet spatted into the ground just ahead of Red, threw clods into his face. He wiped out his eyes, slapped a slug into the log wall of the ranch-house. Moxie's men yelled derisively. They believed they held high cards. Why not? One man against a half dozen. And a court order to back their play.

A rider came tearing around the east end of the stacks. Red leaped up, believing it an enemy scout sent out to draw his fire. But as he raised his rifle, old Bill Dale kicked from his stirrups and rolled off his pony. The cayuse went on with reins whipping its front legs.

Guns bellowed as Bill flopped down by Red. Bullets tore into the hay.

Hoofs clicked, and horns clattered. Bawling cattle came up on the run, began ramming their heads into the stacks.

"Guns won't stop 'em when they're hungry!" shouted Bill.

Gunfire rippled along the front of the ranch-house. Two cows dropped and lay kicking. But that didn't halt the other longhorns from digging into the feed.

"Dale!" came the booming roar of Moxie. "If you don't come out with yore hands up, I'll kill every cow brute you own."

"Moxie, yo're wagin' war on my property—"

"Yo're a fugitive from justice. An' furthermore—aided by a felon from New Mexico."

Dale swung toward Brazos Red. "What does he mean?" he asked.

Red grinned. "Just what he says. Time's past fer excuses. You have seen the cards. Five thousand reward—"

Bill Dale could surrender, save his cattle, lay claim to a portion of the reward. Lumpjaw Moxie might strike a truce. Balmy days would come again to the Seventy-Seven.

"Go on out," said Red. "I'll stay here an' make my stand. You see, ol' timer, I've sworn not to hang fer my sins."

Dale pawed the ice out of his mustache. Then he reached over and shook Red's hand.

"I'm stayin' with yuh!" he said.

TWO more cows were butchered before Moxie decided that killing an entire herd would consume valuable time and bullets.

Gunfire halted. There was a silence around the cabin. Dale peered through the driving sleet. His eyes were anxious.

"What are they up to?" he asked.

"Somethin' dirty you can bet," snapped Red.

It was something dirty. Straight toward the stacks bounced a ball of fire.

"By the livin'!" Bill Dale yelled. "They are settin' fire to tumble-weeds. The wind will drive 'em into the stacks. Them weeds are full of creosote—"

The blazing tumble-weed, driven by the wind, whirled toward the hay. It came on in bounds that drew curses from Bill Dale! Then, ten feet from the nearest stack, the weed struck a half-buried boulder. It clung there, wavering in the wind, while sparks and smoke blew toward the hay.

Dale leaped up before Red could check him. He raced toward the burning weed. A rifle barked. The old man halted, seemed to wilt. Then he regained balance, lurched ahead.

"You damn fool!" bawled Moxie. "Go back—or I'll kill yuh!"

Bill Dale flung back his head, roared a defiance like a gray wolf at bay. He took another step. And Lumpjaw Moxie, running out from the ranch-house cover for better shooting, knocked Dale down. The old man fell, not five feet from the blazing weed. He reached vainly toward it

with his bare hands, once—twice. Then he lay there quietly.

Out of the space between the stacks, dodging past feeding cattle came Brazos Red. He had dropped his Winchester, lost his hat. Here was the time and place for six-guns. He carried in his fist the old Colt that had calloused his right hip from New Mexico to Wyoming.

In the teeth of the bitter wind, he reached old Bill, stepped across the cattleman's body. He heard Bill's weak call.

"They busted my leg. Put—put out that fire!"

Red's eyes were on Moxie's gang. With only one man remaining on his feet, they bunched to rush him. A sudden gust of wind dislodged the burning weed. It broke loose from the boulder, bounced toward the hay before Red could extinguish it.

With a mighty effort, old Bill Dale drew his good leg up under his pain-wracked body. Every move was torture but the cattleman propped up on his elbows. Then he reached his knees.

"Damn him!" boomed Moxie. "He packs as much lead as a winder sash!"

Two guns roared as one. Bill Dale went down a second time but he fell on the tumble-weed and smothered the fire with his body.

Moxie, leading the charge on Brazos Red, had run straight into the New Mexican's bullet. The man broke at the knees, pitched forward. His fall shook his gun arm. His bullet burned Red's right ear.

But five men were following Moxie. Led by the yellow-chinned Towers, they rushed in, anxious to make their kill. The lanky gunfighter, who stood over Bill Dale's body, was worth five thousand dollars, dead or alive. As they ran, they spread out in a fan that was fronted with deadly steel.

Brazos Red decided that this was the show-down. He might take out a man or two but they would get him with stabbing bullets from the flanks. But he had settled with Moxie for the horse.

"Come on," he barked. "Nobody can live forever."

Two riders broke out of the sleet. They had come up from the rear, and the storm had muffled the drum of galloping hoofs. They swept between Red and the hostiles.

One slid from his saddle and flung himself on yellow-chinned Towers. The two crashed over in a struggle. The second horseman, straight in leather, roared:

"In the name of the United States. Yo're all under arrest—"

As the rider barked the command, he swung so that Brazos Red spotted a gleaming badge pinned to the front of his sourdough coat.

"By Gosh!" breathed Red. "I know the shape of that badge. That's a dep'ty United States marshal."

THE man who had tackled Towers, had won his fight. He sat astride Moxie's henchman. And handcuffs were tight around Towers' bony wrists.

The four remaining gunmen, caught under the marshal's six-gun, and dismayed at his shout that they were bucking Uncle Sam, stood in a sullen group.

Moxie lay on the ground, not far distant from the slim man who had tackled and cuffed up Towers.

This victor now stood up leisurely. He was panting slightly but there was a thin grin on his face as he looked toward Brazos Red. It was young Idaho.

"Sorry," the boy said, "that I had to quit you. I'd have preferred coming along with the cattle. Hadn't any idea Moxie would try such a raid. But Bill over there—the deputy marshal—was under orders to meet me at Bitter Creek with warrants for the arrest of Moxie and his gang. On charges of conspiracy against the federal government. Based on his

hiring of fake homesteaders to take up all this land. Took me months to dig up the evidence."

Red gasped. "I—I thought you was a rockhound."

Idaho grinned. "I am. But for six months I've been a special agent of the federal land office. Running down stuff like this Moxie graft. That's why I posed as a nester. To get evidence. But I had no power to make the arrest. That's why I had to bring Bill. We got here—"

"Just in time," Red said gravely. "They busted yore dad's leg."

The next move came so swiftly that Bill Dale almost lost a son. Moxie reared up. He was wounded but like a rattlesnake, it didn't appear he would die until sunset. His six-gun snapped toward Idaho.

"Damn you," Moxie breathed hoarsely, "for a double-crosser—"

Brazos Red's gun spoke first. Moxie's bullet dug into the ground a yard ahead of the marksman as Moxie settled down again, and this time forever.

Brazos Red put up his gun. He had finished off Moxie but Bill, the marshal, wore a star and others of the Moxie gang knew that Red was a fugitive from justice.

Idaho walked over to Red. "Ringbone," he said, "was the only one who knew the inside of my play. There was a real reason for Moxie trying this range war. If he could starve and buy out the Seventy-Seven, he'd also get mineral rights to all these outcroppings that look like coal."

"Coal?"

"Like coal," Idaho corrected. "As a matter of fact, that's oil shale. Plenty of decent oilmen will pay good money to my dad for a chance to lease his place, and drill. He can move on west with his cattle where there's more room for cows."

"Fine," said Red. Then he asked. "What about—Ringbone an' Peg? Are they—alive?"

Idaho smiled. "We passed 'em as we come in. Ringbone has a busted collarbone but he'll git over it. An' Peg—why all they did to him was shoot off his wooden leg. That's why he flopped over. Now—"

Red waited for this boy who put duty ahead of other things to spring a charge and call on him to surrender. But Idaho was smiling.

"I'm just a special agent of the land office," he said. "No power to make an arrest. There's my hoss over there. I won't be needin' him. Got to look after my dad. It's not far to Montana. Good trailin'."

"Good trailin'," said Brazos Red. . . .

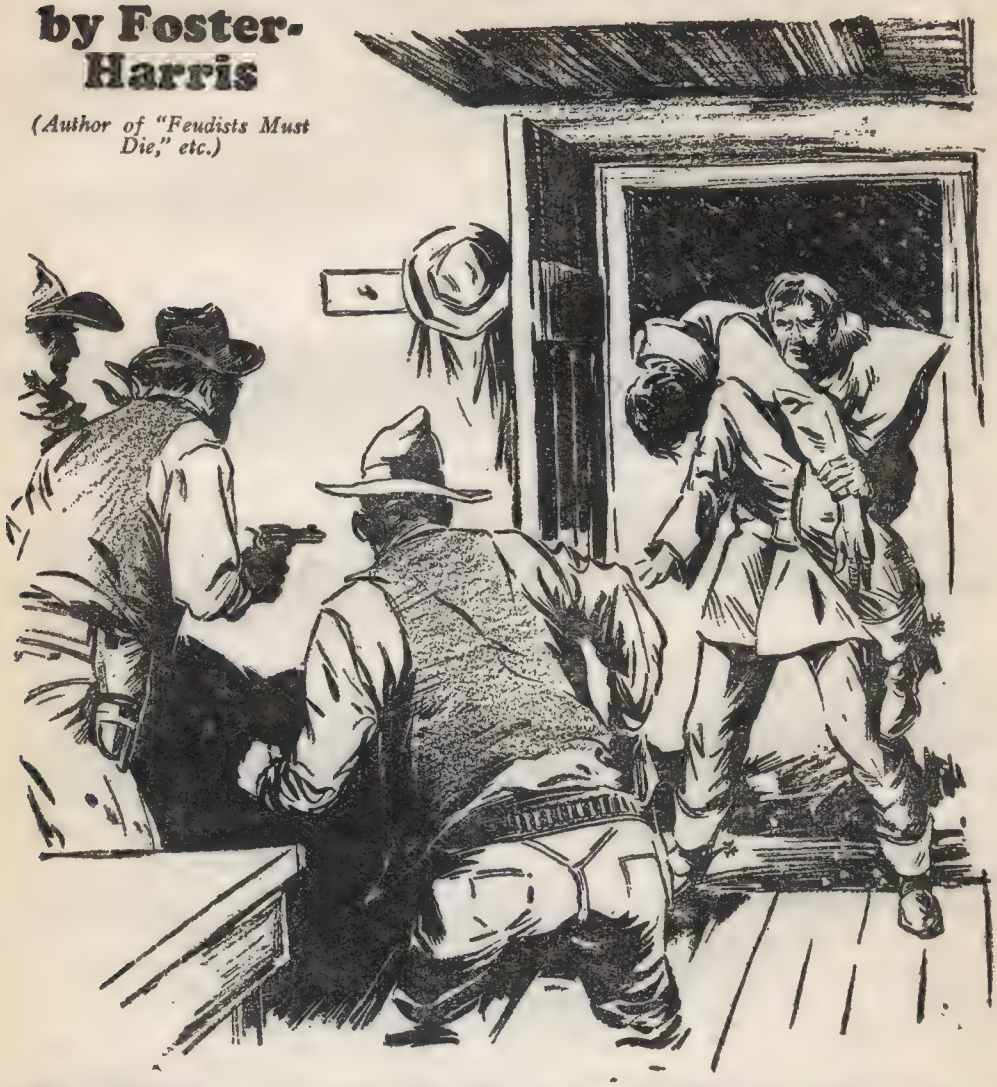
THE END

This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale, or use thereof is unlawful.

GUNS OF THE STORM

by Foster-Harris

(Author of "Feudists Must Die," etc.)



Wes Devlin could leave his bitterest enemy to die and vanish in that blazing cabin—or wounded and weary, he could try to carry him through the blizzard, when saving him would tie Devlin's own hang-rope knot!

RAW, September wind was knifing down the one street of Medicine Gulch as Wes Devlin stepped out of the livery stable. He shivered. To his Texas blood this Montana mountain country already was bitterly cold. But in the buckskin sack in his pocket was another five hundred dollars worth of new placer gold. It seemed to take away some of the chill.

With beginner's luck, Wes Devlin had been doing very well all summer. When the stage company delivered this to his Butte bank, he would have around two thousand dollars on deposit. That was more money than Wes had ever had be-

fore in his twenty-three years of life. And he hoped to add at least as much more before his Deer Creek claim played out.

Then Wes meant to buy himself a little cow spread somewhere—some place where he could settle down peacefully and forget his gunfighting past. Down in Texas, Wes Devlin had thoroughly got his fill of always being ticketed a Colt hawk. He had come north just to get away from that kind of a rep. He intended to stay away from it. . . .

Today, for the first time in weeks, Wes had buckled on his gun, because he was carrying gold. Sheriff Hack Faber recenly had issued a strict no-pistol-packing-in-town dictum. So obediently, Wes had left his belt hanging on his saddle, in the livery stable.

Whistling cheerfully, he started up the street toward the stage station. He was just passing the Ten Strike Saloon when he heard the clatter of hoofs behind him. Twisting, he saw that it was Sheriff Faber and a posse.

They were dust-covered, grim-faced. Across the saddle of a led horse hung the tarp-shrouded body of a dead man. As Wes paused, staring, the sheriff reined swiftly toward him and dismounted. "Take the body on to the undertaker's, boys," he rasped at his posse. And then to Wes: "Devlin, I want to talk to you."

"Why sure." Wes nodded, puzzled. "What's the trouble?"

For a moment Faber did not answer. He was a big man, with a hard, red face. His small eyes had little, cold flecks in them, like speckled granite. Just now their scrutiny was sharp, hostile, chill.

"Devlin, where was you about ten o'clock this mornin'?"

"Why, at my cabin. Gettin' ready to come to town." Wes stared. "How come yo're interested?"

Again it was a long moment before the lawman replied. "The stage was stuck up ag'in this mornin', at Deer Creek crossin', not five miles from your place. Man that done it was masked, but—" Faber broke off, heavy eyelids drooping. "There by yourself?" he demanded in a sudden snarl.

"Yes." Wes flushed hotly. "But, by the eternal, Sheriff, if yo're insinuatin' I had anything to do with it—"

"Can't say what he was doin' just at ten, Sheriff," cut in a soft drawl. "But nearly all mawnin' he was putterin' around his shack, peaceable. I seen him."

Wes jerked about, staring. Eyes wide with surprise, he took in the freckled face of the man who had spoken. And then, automatically, his clawed hand moved toward where his gun should have been, but wasn't.

Buck Moore! Out of the past had come Buck Moore, star gunfighter of the Crown outfit, down Texas way. He had been Wes Devlin's one-time deadliest foeman. And now Buck Moore was up here; and calmly admitting that he had been out spying on Wes, at his lonely cabin.

"Howdy, Wes?" Buck nodded, his grin mocking, inscrutable. "How're yuh?"

"Seen him, yuh say?" Before Wes could open his mouth, the sheriff was interrupting, in a brittle, edged tone. "Well, Mister, just who are you and what was you doin' out there? Tell me!"

"The name is Moore." The big gunfighter bowed sardonically. "Just happened to be ridin' by, Sheriff. I'll talk to yuh, private."

"Damn right you will!" Sheriff Faber's face was suddenly dark with pumping blood. His hand gripped the horn handle of his colt. "Come on. And you, Devlin, don't leave town. I want to talk to you some more, too."

"I'll be around," agreed Wes coldly. With grim question, his eyes met Moore's and his voice changed to a slurred drawl. "Up here lookin' for me, are yuh, Buck?"

"Mebbe. Mebbe not." Buck Moore gestured amiably. "I'll let yuh know." He swung casually, letting the lawman lead him away. Grim-mouthed, somber, Wes Devlin watched them go.

THE stage station was only a few steps on. But he had forgotten his errand now. Slowly he turned, retracing his course to the livery stable. When he emerged again his holstered sixshooter was against his leg, thonged down.

It could be no accident that the big, towheaded gunman was up here and had ridden five long miles off the trail to Wes's lonely claim. Buck Moore was looking for him.

Down in Texas the trouble between Bar 10 and the Crown Syndicate outfit never had brought Wes and Buck to grips. But such a showdown certainly had been brewing. Wes hadn't hired to Bar 10 as a killer. But a Crown rider, Joe Porter, had been found shot in the back. Accidentally overhearing a conversation, Wes had learned that his own boss, Pike Gibbons, almost certainly had done the shooting, and that Pike intended egging him on to try and down Buck Moore.

In swift revulsion, Wes Devlin had quit. He had nothing against Moore. Nor did he wish any part of killing trouble on the lawless side. He had come this far away just to stay peaceful.

A smoky anger filling his brain, he strode into the Ten Strike and ordered a small drink, waiting with grim impatience. The fat bartender squirmed nervously as he took in the combination of Wes's face and that banned forty-five at his thigh. He knew storm warnings when he saw them, did Dutch Kraus, but he said nothing. And presently, as members of the posse drifted in, from the excited buzz of conversation Wes picked up the main facts about the stage holdup.

Again it had apparently been the work of but one bandit. At least one was all Price Jackson, the driver, had seen. He had been masked and shrouded in a slicker as usual. When the stage had slowed to make the difficult crossing at the creek he had attacked without warning. At point-blank range the shotgun charge virtually had blown the head off Zack Smith, the messenger. Then the stickup had taken the Wells Fargo box, leaving the badly wounded Jackson to make it to the next station.

The express box had carried about five thousand dollars in placer gold. A robbery of that size was bad enough in itself. But this was the fourth time the stage had been robbed; and this time there had been cold-blooded murder. Zack Smith had been very popular. From the angry comments, Wes knew these rough miners and cowmen would give the road agent mighty short shift, if they caught him.

Significantly, they eyed Wes from under covert lids. Only one, Jeff Prater, came rolling over to speak to him.

"Been in town all mornin', have yuh, Wes?" he asked. And then, before Wes could answer: "Hell, I told Faber it couldn't uh been you. Even though Price did say the skunk was jest yore build. You been bringin' in gold, but I know damn well you been pannin' it out honest."

"Much obliged, Jeff," nodded Wes gratefully. "I'm not yore road agent and I—"

He broke off, suddenly conscious of Prater's stare, of the sudden silence behind him. Deadly tense, he swung. Sheriff Faber was coming in the door. Behind him, still grinning, was Buck Moore.

The sheriff came straight toward Devlin, his face darkening as he saw the belt and Colt. His voice crackled. "Thought I'd told you before, Mister, there's a law ag'in' gun packin' in this town."

"You told me," nodded Wes coldly. "This ain't for yore benefit." And then

his gray eyes widened slightly in puzzled surprise.

Buck Moore had been wearing his hardware the first time Wes had seen him. But now apparently the red gunman was weaponless. His freckled grin widened mockingly as he met Wes's glare. Without a word, he stepped on to the bar, signalling Dutch for a drink.

"Well, go shed that cutter, if yo're stayin' in town," growled Faber, half turning away. "That's orders."

Again Wes nodded slowly. He was trying hard to fathom what was behind all this; Moore obviously not arrested and the sheriff's sudden change of tone. There was something funny going on, beyond all doubt.

"Yuh was wantin' to talk to me," he reminded in a toneless drawl.

"Oh, not now." Sheriff Faber shrugged, frowned. "Moore there's made it pretty plain you couldn't of had anything to do with it. Uh, ain't seen any suspicious strangers lately, have yuh?"

"No." Wes shook his head. "Ain't seen a soul for two weeks. I been pretty busy."

"Uh huh." Obviously uninterested, the sheriff was moving away. "Well, if you do spot anything suspicious, lemme know."

Frankly mystified, Wes downed the last of his drink and started slowly toward the door. Again his gaze caught Buck Moore's green eyes. Tight-lipped, he hesitated. The red gunman waved airily.

"I'll be seein' yuh, Wes," he called and his white teeth flashed in a smile. "Take care of yoreself."

"I aim to." Wes Devlin laughed bleakly. He got it now, or thought he did. The red gunner was issuing his challenge. "Yuh know where I live, Buck, and I'll be there. Any time yuh care to call."

HE WAS still puzzling as he rode out of town an hour later. And he would continue to wonder for the next several days.

Why was Moore up here? What had he told the sheriff to change that hombre's attitude so quickly? Particularly, why had he gone to the trouble of alibiing Wes when by mere silence he could have saved himself risk and perhaps put Wes in all sorts of hot water?

Wes Devlin could hazard answers. Most likely Moore was up here because of Joe Porter. The murdered Crown rider had been one of Buck's close friends and probably Moore had become convinced that Wes had killed him.

How Moore had soothed the sheriff Wes could not guess. But why, was easy. Buck Moore had alibied Wes, had started nothing in town because he wanted to make this man to man. Personal!

But why, then, didn't Moore show up?

Wes Devlin wondered; and set his jaw grimly when he realized perhaps that was just what the gunman wanted him to do. Perhaps Moore was up there on the timbered ridges right now, watching, just waiting for Wes to break.

Well, if so, the red gunfighter was going to be badly fooled. Wes hadn't done anything wrong. He intended neither to run nor to go seeking his enemy. He was trying to stay peaceful. But between peacefulness and cowardice there was a hell of a big difference and if Moore didn't know it, he was due to learn.

But the days went on and still no Buck Moore. Wes labored as usual, keeping his weapons always handy. He had a sluice box built down by the creek into which he shoveled his gold-bearing sand. And there was firewood to be shagged in and his leanto stable finished.

He meant to stick here all winter although, he knew, the creek would freeze soon and he must suspend his mining until spring. Already ice was forming on the edges of the little stream every night.

Stubbornly, he tried not to even think of Moore. But whether from imagination or not, constantly he had the feel of hidden eyes watching him. Twice while rounding up his ponies he found fresh, strange tracks of a shod horse on nearby ridgetops. The sight added fuel to the steadily growing resentment in his breast.

Once again Wes Devlin was just about getting a bellyful. He had promised himself to stay out of gunfights. But this business of being constantly stalked by a killer was enough to rile even a lifelong peaceful man. Reformed or not, Wes was mighty tired of it.

He was just coming back from dragging in firelogs one morning when he saw a man hurriedly mounting a pony, in front of the cabin. At the distance and through the intervening tangle of branches he was very hard to see. But Wes decided immediately it must be Buck Moore. He cut loose his rope, started to crash forward through the limbs. Instantly there came the flash of a shot and a bullet spatted close over his head.

Fighting mad, Wes Devlin grabbed for his gun. That shot had been without warning. And now the rider was lining it for the timber.

The fugitive had vanished in the thick underbrush across the creek when Wes broke into the open. But threshing limbs marked his course. Too mad to be cautious, Wes Devlin tore right after him.

Atop the hill, the fresh, plain tracks told that Moore had spun south. Spurring recklessly, Wes hung on. About three or four minutes later he was rewarded by a glimpse of a tall, brown Stetson just fading into a cedar break perhaps a pistol shot away.

Whether Moore heard his challenging shout or not, Wes did not know. But the fugitive did not stop. Shouting again, and frankly amazed that the big gunman should thus be running, Wes charged after him. And about halfway to the break was rewarded for his recklessness with a salvo of bullets that buzzed like highly enraged hornets.

The fighter was afoot. Covered up and triggering a rifle with the speed of a Gatling. It was plain suicide, to charge farther into that. Dropping flat against his horse, Wes went away from there, pronto.

Fifty feet to the right was cover, a jutting ledge of broken rock. Wes made it in one bounding, flying rush.

Now he was boiling. If this was the way Moore wanted to play, why okay. When Wes lit out of his saddle, he had his Winchester unleathered. Scrambling up the rocks, he found a niche and raked the thicket ahead with a half dozen angry shots.

There was no answer. Flushed, wrathful, Wes crouched, waiting for another sign of his foe. But he saw nothing. More lead failed to flush the gunman. Finally Wes made a flanking move and got into the little break from the lower side. With growing amazement, he found that Moore apparently had paused only for the one volley. The tracks showed that he had then slipped out to the south and fled headlong.

Disgustedly, Wes went back and retrieved his horse. For the first time a doubt crossed his mind as to whether it was really Buck Moore he had chased. He was almost sure he had recognized the big man. But still he hadn't seen him plain; and this business of running like a rabbit was so unlike the Moore Wes had known it made him wonder.

THE north was spitting an occasional snowflake now and there was a snarl to the wind. Wes held stubbornly to the trail a while longer. Then he lost it on a rocky stretch, and realized abruptly that if he didn't get home in a hurry it was possible he would never reach his cabin.

The temperature was dropping like a plummet; and the whole north was a sweeping, dirty gray. Unmistakably, a blizzard was coming.

For a moment he thought about going on, to see if he could catch the fugitive at the stage line's abandoned swing station, near Deer Creek crossing. Aside from his own cabin, that deserted station was the only shelter Wes knew of, within fifteen miles. And with this blizzard blowing in, Moore certainly would have to hole up somewhere.

But then, with a shake of his head, he decided it was not worth chancing. Swinging toward the creek, he started back to his claim.

It was well he did elect to follow that creek. For, long before he arrived, the storm was so thick he could see scarcely twenty feet. Sleet and snow, flung by a steadily gathering gale, blinded him. On the upland, without that guiding creek-bank to follow he would have been lost.

As it was, he all but stumbled over his own sluicebox before he recognized where he was. Gasping, he turned toward the cabin, leading his mount. So thick was the flying murk that he was actually at the door, starting past to put his pony in the leanto, before he realized that another horse was standing there, all huddled. The cabin door was slightly open. Inside, bending over the fireplace, was a familiar figure.

For a clocktick, Wes Devlin stared. Then he dropped his bridlerein and was furiously flexing his numbed, right hand, to get the blood circulating. A thin smile creased his storm-beaten face as he opened the door very softly and stepped in.

"Well, Buck?" he drawled. "Nice, findin' you here."

Buck Moore jerked about, startled. Something burned, blackened, dangled from his hand. He had raked the blazing coals out on the hearth and the cabin was full of smoke. He coughed as he got to his feet, then grinned mirthlessly.

"Storm run yuh back, did it, Wes? Tough. Now I got to take yuh."

"Yeah?" Wes poised himself. "Any time, Buck. If you feel able."

Abruptly, he realized that Moore's wide hat was gray—gray, not brown, as was the Stetson of the man Wes had chased. But there was no time to wonder about it now. Buck had crouched. He was speaking again, in a curiously even drawl.

"Before we have at it, Wes, lemme git the formalities off my chest and ask, would yuh rather surrender? Take yore chances with the law? I know yuh won't. If yuh did, this evidence would hang yuh."

"Evidence?" Blankly puzzled, Wes glared at the charred object Buck was holding up. It looked like a piece of a sack. A coiled bit of blackened wire, a half melted lead seal, still clung to it.

"Damn careless, Wes, just throwin' this express sack in the fire," Buck reproved softly. "Otherwise you was pretty smart. Stickin' up the stage and with a claim here where you could say yuh was pannin' out the gold, all honest. But—"

"Why, you dirty—" With an angry, amazed roar Wes jerked forward. Too late he realized that he had touched off the explosion. . . .

TAKING his move for the start of a draw, Buck was going for his gun. There was nothing to do now but try and beat him. Wes Devlin laughed hoarsely, flung himself sideways. Lightning fast, his hand went down.

The smash of their .45's was one blended blast. His aim spoiled by Wes's flashing sideslip, Buck Moore's bullet barely ticked Devlin's side. But Wes Devlin's slug seemed to cut the red fighter down as though with an ax. Before Wes could thumb home another shot, the table

between them leaped like a live thing and knocked his legs from under him.

Floored, Buck had dived under the table to get to grips with his foe.

They rolled end over end, in a wild, threshing tangle. Buck had lost his gun. He had Wes's pistol hand locked in a steel grip. Spitting like a cat, Wes was fighting in mad fury to break free.

He managed it at last, felt Buck go limp under a savage jolt to the jaw. Molten fire ate into his back and neck as he rolled away. Flailing wildly, he came to his feet with an appalled cry.

Knocking over the table, Moore had upended a half-filled pail of grease squarely into the coals on the hearth. It had caught. The tinder dry cabin already was an inferno.

One breath before, Wes Devlin had been doing his furious best to kill Buck Moore. But now, frantically, he leaped forward to save him. Through a solid sheet of flame he stooped, catching Buck's blazing shoulders. Somehow he got him out, rolling him over and over in the snow, then floundering crazily about to smother the spots of fire eating through his own clothing.

When he got to his knees, the interior of the cabin was one roaring blaze. His pistol was lying near the door, kicked out as they emerged and he retrieved it. But that, with the clothing he had on, was all. Scared by the shooting and flame, the horses had stampeded. Even the pony in the leanto had somehow got out and was gone.

Wes dragged the unconscious Buck farther back from the blaze. They were in a bad fix and he appreciated it. They had no shelter; and this blizzard was just starting. It might hold for days. Wounded, burned as they were, unless they found cover quickly it would be trail's end for them both.

Buck Moore stirred faintly, groaned. Wes twisted toward him again. The red fighter's torn coat revealed a hideout Colt, still holstered under his armpit. Wes pocketed that. Hurriedly, he examined the big man's hurts. His bullet had struck low, tearing through Buck's left thigh, a disabling, though by no means necessarily fatal wound. But Moore also was pretty well scorched, unconscious and utterly helpless.

With a wry grimace, Wes wiped snow from his eyes and did what he could to patch Buck's injuries with strips torn from his shirt. The stirring evidently aroused the wounded man, for when Wes looked up, the green eyes were staring at the fire. Gamely, Buck tried to grin.

"Looks like—you win, don't it?" he said in a voice so faint that Wes had to bend close to hear him. "But what yuh—messin' with me for? G'wan, fool, fog out. Yuh can make it—tuh shelter somewheres."

"At that, mebbe I ought tuh leave yuh lay and freeze," growled Wes. "Tryin' tuh frame them stage stickups on me like you was."

"Frame you?" Bewilderment showed in Buck's eyes. "I wasn't. Why the hell should I? Oh, yuh bonehead, don't yuh sabe yet I—"

He was out again, like a light, his sentence unfinished. Squatting beside him, Wes pondered, then shook his head angrily.

"No, I don't sabe," he muttered. "If yuh mean yo're the road agent, then yuh was tryin' tuh frame somethin' on me. If yuh ain't, why the hell was yuh searchin' my cabin?"

IT was a puzzle that as yet he could not solve. And there was no time to mull over it. The storm was growing steadily worse, coming straight from the Pole. It would be a terrific task now, even for an unencumbered man to flounder his way

those five long miles to the deserted stage station. But it was get there or perish.

Frowning grimly, he looked down at the silent Moore. "Well, red feller, since I done such a pore job of shootin' yuh I guess it's up to me to take care of yuh," he said. "C'mon. We'll see how fur we can git with me playin' pack hoss."

He got Buck's big frame across his shoulders, stood up with difficulty and started out.

It was downwind and he could follow the creek. Those were his only helps. Otherwise all was against him. Before he had gone a quarter mile he knew he was in for the toughest battle of his life.

The zero gale was knifing mercilessly through his ripped, burned clothes. Buck's weight was a crushing burden, heavier every step. Howling wind sucked the breath from his laboring lungs. The world was a whirling, dizzy nightmare, stinging sleet, hurtling snow.

Always, that deadly cold was stealing his strength, numbing his brain through the endless, grinding battle. Each time he rested, it was harder to go on. His wounded side pained. Almost irresistible at times was the yearning to lie down in those soft drifts, just for a moment, and to sleep.

Once, ploughing along head down, he realized abruptly that he could no longer make out the vague, guiding line of the creek. He was on a flat, apparently and he didn't know where. The swift panic of it wrenched the numbness momentarily out of his brain. Groping frantically, he found the creek again, by pure luck. After that he got down and stayed right on the ice.

It was thin as yet, slick and treacherous. But to miss its pointing path would mean death. Grim, dogged, Wes fought on. How he managed Moore when he rested he never afterward clearly remembered. But he made out somehow, for when he came to the slope where the stage road crossed the creek, he was still carrying his foe.

Vaguely, he thought perhaps that Moore was conscious and said something. He was too numb to be sure. Each step was a terrific task now, requiring his entire will. He turned slowly, laboring up the rough path, toward the corral and cabin, a hundred yards away.

Smoke was whipping from the chimney! Somebody was there! Warmth and help! The realization brought a joyous, clearing surge to Wes' brain. At a staggering run he drove the last few steps, thudded against the door, calling out in a raspy husk of voice.

The door opened. There was an amazed cry. A hand caught at him and he was looking into the red, angry face of Sheriff Hack Faber.

"What the hell!" Behind Faber a second man was brandishing a gun. His voice was strident. "Devlin! My Gawd, then that damn Moore didn't git him! Why—" Faber's snarling curse cut him short.

The fellow was Joe Soule, Wes recognized dazedly. Sheriff Faber's loud-mouthed deputy. Over by the glowing stove was a third man with something vaguely familiar about him too. But for the moment Wes was too exhausted and half-frozen, to place him. Faber was speaking, in a swift, crackling, disgusted voice.

"What the devil you doin', packin' Moore over here? Is he— Hell, he's shot, ain't he? And yo're both scorched plenty!"

"Yeah." They were lifting the limp Buck off Wes's shoulders now. He figured he might as well tell the truth, or most of it, anyway. "Found him in my cabin and we had a fight. Place caught fire, burned."

"Burned clear up?" The sheriff shook

his arm savagely. "Everything burned? Didn't set it on purpose, did you?"

Wes blinked bewilderedly. He didn't get this at all. Before he could speak, Deputy Joe Soule was cutting in loudly.

"Aw hell, Hack, uh course he didn't. Yore scheme's went wrong. Moore must not of found nuthin'. Yuh know this guy wouldn't be totin' him clean over here, savin' his life, if—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Hack Faber's voice clashed like a steel trap. His hand ripped the Colt out of Wes' holster. "Stand hitched, Texas man," he snarled. And then, to the third man, just dumping Moore on a bunk: "Steve, is that red hellion conscious?"

"Dead tuh the world," reported Steve, grinning sourly. "Don't look like he's hit fatal, though. Ain't that too bad?"

"Yuh better play safe, plug 'em both, Hack," broke in Soule again. "We can say we found 'em thataway and they musta done in each other."

"I'll run this, Joe," rapped Faber and prodded Wes with his own gun. "You, Devlin! Git over there and belly the wall. Move!—or I'll let yuh have it right now."

DUMBFOUNDED, Wes moved slowly to obey. His eyes fixed on the grinning Steve, widened slightly in abrupt recognition.

"Why, say!" he breathed. "Yo're the skunk I was chasin', ain't yuh? That brown hat. . . . Too bad I didn't plug yuh, dead center."

"Yeah?" Steve exposed broken teeth in a sneer. "You ain't gonna plug nuthin' but a grave, fall guy. Yo're gonna play bein' the road agent—plenty dead."

Wes took another wavering step toward the stove. They meant to kill him. He got that. The hideout gun he had taken off Buck was still in his coat pocket. There was only the thinnest kind of chance that he could get it out and beat three of them. But it was his sole hope.

"So yo're the one planted that Wells Fargo sack on me! I'm damned! But would yuh mind tellin' me where you come in on this, Faber? Were you stickin' up the stage yoreself, or just takin' a cut?"

"Yo're guessin' close." Hack Faber grinned cruelly. "Since you'll publish it only in hell, I'll tell yuh I been havin' Steve here do the stick-uppin'. This red friend uh yores was gittin' suspicious. So I arranged fer him tuh find a hot trail towards yore shack. Figured he'd down you or you him. Either way we'd—"

Casually, Wes had raised his hand to his pocket. Without warning he hurled himself behind the stove, digging crazily for that little gun. His voice ripped out:

"Go on, Buck, shoot! Don't try tuh parley! Down 'em, quick!"

The desperate ruse made the deputy, Soule, waste one split second. He flicked a startled glance toward the motionless Buck before swinging back with a curse. But Faber's first bullet clanged off the stove even as Wes yelled.

Over by Moore's side the brown-hatted Steve was going hurriedly for his pistol. On his knees, just lifting his own weapon, Wes Devlin knew that in one short breath more it would be all over.

Barring a miracle, they were bound to get him. Three fast gunmen, warm, rested, against one exhausted man. Still, before he passed, he'd take at least one of these renegades with him.

But it was the loose-mouthed Soule who plunged forward and compelled his first fire. Wes blasted him in mid-air. Dying, the big deputy kept coming, catching his foe in a blind, convulsive grip.

With a triumphant oath, the sheriff dodged forward. "Stand away, Hack!" screamed Steve, over by the bunk.

And then the miracle happened.

A wavering, freckled hand licked out from behind that crouching killer, catching his pistol, wrenching it back, up. Powder roared. And Steve's whole face was gone, in a ghastly gout of blood.

"Right with yuh, boy!" Wes Devlin heard Buck Moore's thin cry. "Ride 'em!"

Then Wes was loose, pounding at the triggering, cursing Faber. Three times, so fast it sounded almost like one blast.

Hack Faber coughed, wilted, slid down. It was all done. Swaying drunkenly, Wes turned toward the silent, staring Moore. "Well, red feller," he muttered. "They caught us cold, but they damn shore didn't lay us out thataway. Thanks for helpin' me out."

"Had tuh—try and pay fer my ride some way." Buck's voice was faint, but he was grinning. "Particular since these hellions seemed tuh be plannin' my funeral, too."

Wes went slowly over toward him. "I'm still guessin' just where you come in on all this, Buck," he pondered. "I had the idee yuh was on my trail tuh augur some about Texas matters. But this here crook sheriff seemed plumb persuaded you was after him."

"I was. But I didn't know it 'til yuh smoked him out just now. I heard him." Buck chuckled feebly. "Hell, Wes, I know yuh didn't kill Joe Porter. If that's the Texas matter yuh mean. I didn't come up here after you special. I was sent tuh try and root out whoever's been robbin' the stages."

He paused, gathering strength to go on. "Mebbe yuh don't know. But the same bunch owns the Crown ranch holds most of the stock in this stage line company. They been catchin' hell about these holdups and Faber there just couldn't seem to do nothin'. So they brung me up and give me a special officer's commission from the governor. Since you was already under suspicion I couldn't tell yuh why I was watchin' yuh. But I had to tell Faber, there in town. And—well, I guess he got worried and figgered he better frame it so either you'd git me and do tuh hang, or I'd git you and be satisfied. But fer you, he'd uh got away with it, too. I didn't suspect him."

"So yo're a law officer, huh?" Wes Devlin drew a relieved breath. "Now I am glad I toted yuh over here! Yo're gonna help in explainin' how come a peaceful guy like me shot a sheriff."

Feeling curiously happy, he glanced about the cabin. There was firewood beside the stove, saddlebags holding food on the table. They could last out the blizzard, all right. And eventually somebody, help, would be coming along the road.

"You oughta be damn glad yuh carted me over, feller," grinned Buck. "I'll not only alibi yuh. But I got a whole bottle uh nose warmer right here in my pocket. Come help me git it out."

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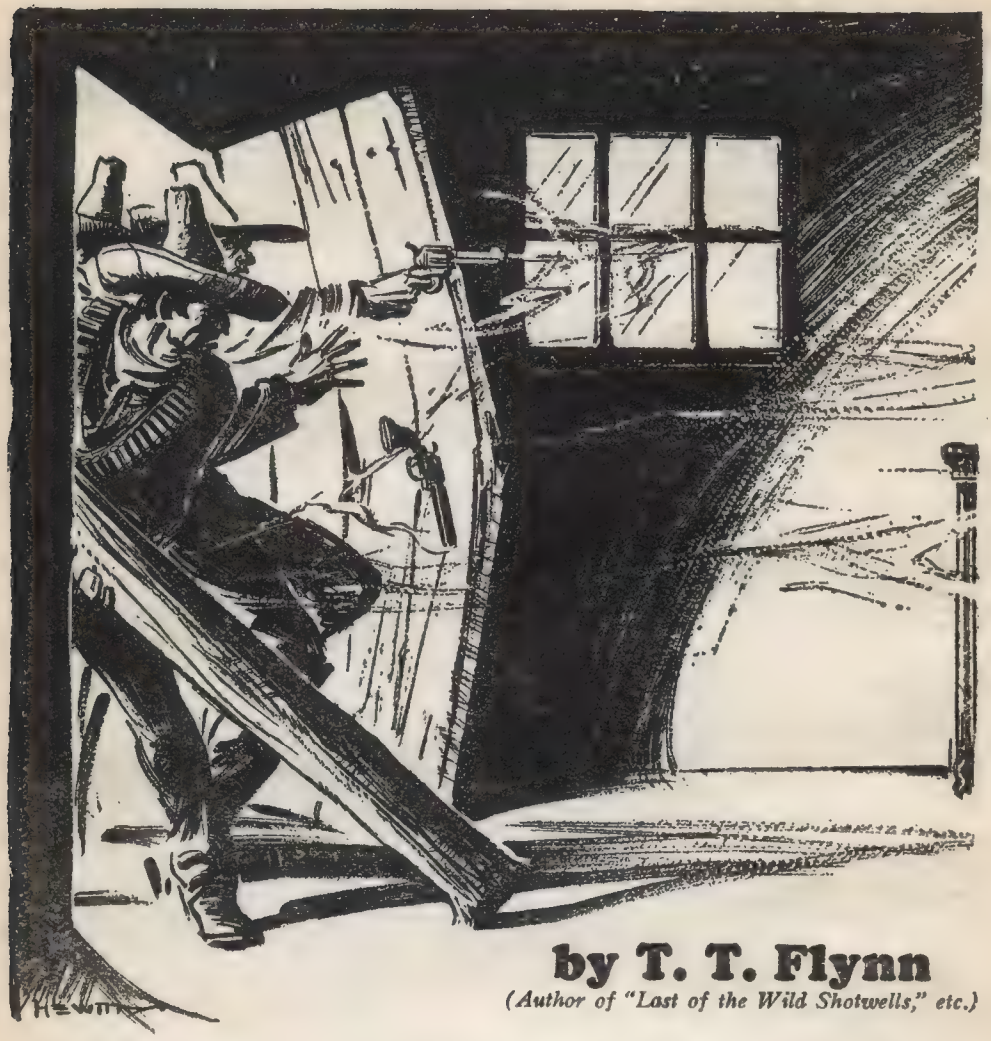


by T. T. Flynn

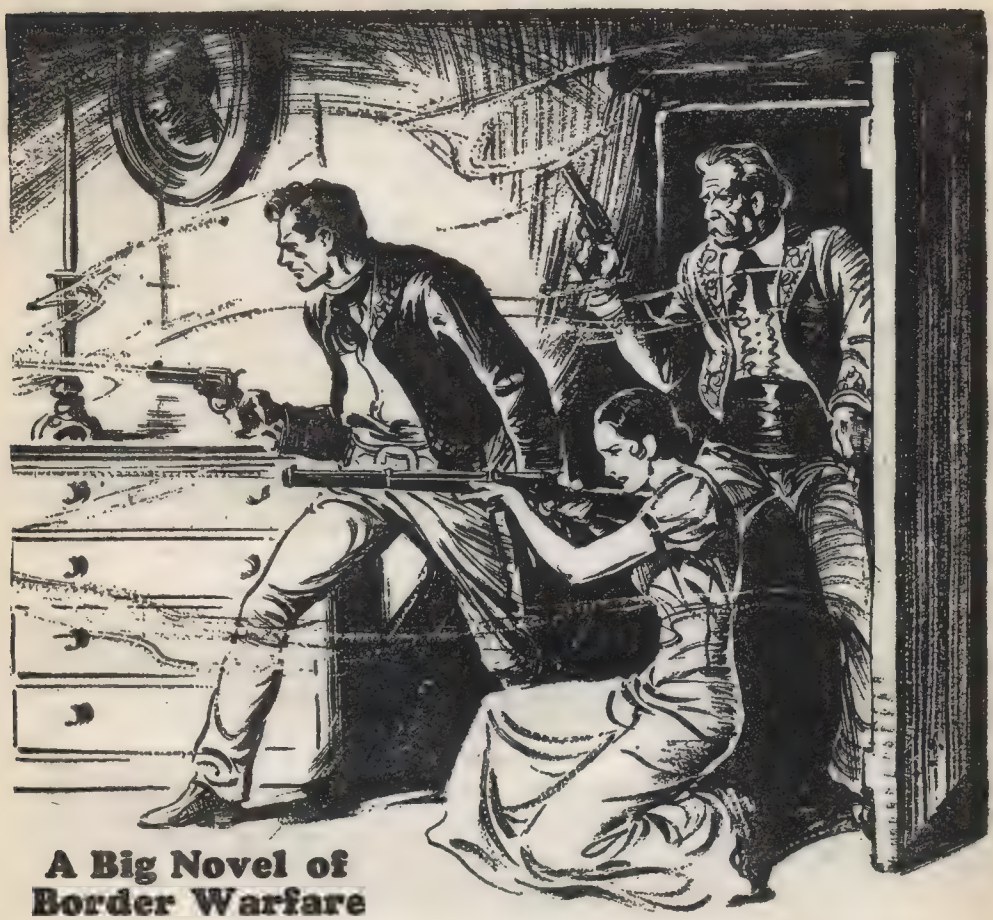
(Author of "Last of the Wild Shotwells," etc.)

They were a proud and haughty lot, those Dons of San Saba who traced their lineage back to the nobles of ancient Spain. Yet young Don Mike, their Gringo cousin from the north, set out to tame them. With guns and courage and the fighting blood of Ireland he aimed to win back the empire they had stolen from him—and even marry the loveliest of their beautiful women.

DON MIKE O'GRADY'S mother had been Antonita del Grazar, of that ancient clan whose lands, a thousand miles to the southeast, formed an empire of their own. In his dreams Don Mike could see her yet, that lovely woman, black-haired and vivid, small, dainty and proud, always a stranger among the blunt, blond Americans of the Oregon country.

Before he was six Don Mike sensed the faint sadness that walked always with his smiling mother. Perhaps, too Antonita O'Grady did not know that her son was

OF SAN SABA



A Big Novel of Border Warfare

absorbing more than words those nights under the clear bright stars when she talked to him a bit wistfully of that distant country where she had been a girl—the country of *caballeros* and peons, of fighting Apaches and Navajos, of vast sheep flocks and herds of cattle, and mines of gold and silver.

They were fabulous tales that his mother told him of that mighty land of mountains and deserts, where the farthermost horizons could not hold the vast del Grazar land grants. He listened spellbound to her stories of the del Grazar men who rode blooded horses bearing silver-studded saddles, proud that they were del Grazars, whose very wish was law.

At seven, Don Mike, called so by his mother, squirmed at her knee and asked: "But Mother, why are we here, where Daddy doesn't own much land?"

Antonita O'Grady smiled in the moonlight, and gently said: "We are here, Don Mike, because I loved your father very much. Oh, *very* much. Never forget, silver and land are not love. When you are a grand man like Big Mike, *hijo mio*, never forget that love is enough—if it is love."

So the picture shaped in young Don Mike's mind—of a daughter of the proud and haughty del Grazars, who had given her love to a rollicking Irishman whose fortune was his horse and saddle, and his

prospects only his heart. She told of how the del Grazar clan had unbendingly opposed her marriage to this outsider. But he had fought for her and won her—he had married her and taken her to this cold and new land of the Northwest.

Antonita O'Grady was content that it had been so. She loved the big husband who would never own an empire, but who never forgot to tell her that he loved her. Yet always a part of her reached back to the Rio Grande and her own people. She would never go back, she told Don Mike, a little sadly, but without bitterness. The del Grazars were proud and unforgiving. If they would not have Big Mike, she would not have them. She, too, was proud.

But Don Mike grew up with that heritage of del Grazar pride, crossed with the gay wildness of his father. Irish and Spanish—quick fire and hard steel—ready laughter and an occasional tear—fierce pride and quick gentleness. Don Mike O'Grady y del Grazar, he was, speaking Spanish and English, with black hair and blue eyes, the smile of a fawn and the smoldering pride of a grandee. He could throw a rope, draw a gun or knife, and ride with the dexterity of one who had been born to such accomplishments.

WHEN Big Mike O'Grady was rolled to death by a man-killing horse, Antonita O'Grady did not weep—much. But to Don Mike, who was twenty, pale and stunned by this unjust thing that had happened, she said:

"We do not belong here any more among these good people. We will go back where there is land that should be mine, and yours, from my father, and make them proud of the name of O'Grady. *Que no, hijo mi?*"

"You bet," said Don Mike.

Antonita O'Grady sold the ranch. It did not bring much. Big Mike had been a better husband and father than a money maker. They took the railroad east to Denver, and south to Las Vegas, and the stage coach from there to Santa Fé. Don Mike marveled as the blond Americans grew fewer and he came into country where Spanish was spoken on every side; and it was all strange, and yet somehow familiar.

In Santa Fé, where the streets were narrow and little burros stood patiently under big loads of firewood in the dusty plaza, Antonita O'Grady touched her flushed cheek and said, "I am sick a little, Don Mike. I think we will stay here for a day or two."

They stayed a week. The last four days Antonita O'Grady spent with the quiet nuns in the hospital beside the church; and then one morning the sun burst up over the green Sangre de Christo mountains to the east and found Don Mike riding alone over the bare, open mesas to the south.

The doctors had been baffled by the little fever which had taken Antonita O'Grady, in spite of everything they could do. But the soft-voiced nun who had been with her at the last had quietly said, "She died of a broken heart."

Through the tears which blinded him and dry sobs which caught his throat as he rode south alone, Don Mike knew it was so. Antonita O'Grady could not live without that rollicking Irishman who had been her life.

MIKE O'GRADY rode into San Saba, on the Rio Grande, as the sun was slipping behind the mountains to the west. Back of him lay dry mesas and dry arroyos, barren dry mountains to the west and to the east across the river. The dust

of the long, hot day's ride lay faintly gray over man and horse.

He was surprised now to find in San Saba a seething bustle of life.

There had been freight wagons back along the rutty road, and a surprising number of riders, but Mike had only nodded to the men he passed. Now here was a crowded plaza with saloons running wide open, horses lined at hitch-racks, freight wagons, ranch wagons, and buggies standing about.

His questing eyes saw brown-skinned Mexicans, lighter American and Spanish cowmen, men with laced boots who looked like miners, and other men, Spanish and American, who looked as if they were more at home in towns than out on the range.

He left his horse at the second livery stable. The first was full. And of the stocky, bearded man in charge, Mike asked: "How far to the Circle Half Moon ranch?"

The stocky man spat. "'Bout twenty-three miles, if yuh mean the headquarters. The Circle Half Moon runs a hundred an' twenty-five miles tuh the west, I hear. Never rode out that far myself. Too damn many Apaches snoopin' around lookin' for what they can pick up."

Mike nodded and talked as he rolled a cigarette. "I've heard they're pretty bad. Howcome the town's so crowded?"

The stocky man stared at him. "Yuh ain't from around here?" he said.

Mike grinned faintly. "Never been here before."

"Huh. I thought so. But yuh mean tuh tell me yuh drifted in here an' never heard about the place? By God, yuh musta, or yuh wouldn't have asked me."

The stocky man spat tobacco juice against the nearest stall post. "Yuh musta come in with blinders on yore eyes an' yore ears stopped up. Don't head too fur west o' here like that. The Apaches has been licked plenty, but they still snoop around tuh see if they can lift a little hair now an' then, an' the Mexicans are mighty surly." The liveryman's voice grew slightly sarcastic. "I reckon yuh know San Saba's the county seat?"

"Yep; I know that," Mike agreed.

"Well, son, there's nine new mines in this end of the county, an' more on the way. They're throwin' new cattle onto the grass all around here an' be damned to anyone, an' San Saba is on the way tuh be the sweetest little puddle of hell yuh ever dirtied yore boots in."

The liveryman spat again and eyed the gun and sheathed knife that Mike wore at his waist.

"Looks like yuh come primed fer trouble. Can yuh use that gun?"

It was Don Mike O'Grady, half Irish, half grandee, who smiled back under half-closed eyes. "Why not?" he asked. "But I didn't come here to kill anyone."

The liveryman chuckled. He found himself liking this tall, dark-haired young fellow. "I suppose," he said, "yuh came here tuh make yore fortune?"

"No," Mike denied mildly. "I came here to take my fortune."

The liveryman stared.

"Mister," he said, "yo're talkin' like trouble *now*. Anyone who comes to San Saba tuh *take* his fortune, is mighty apt to have tuh shoot for it."

Mike sobered. It sounded like an omen, which he was quick to deny.

"I think not," he said. "I'll get my horse in the morning. *Buenos noches, señor.*"

DON MIKE wandered about the plaza taking in the sights. So this was San Saba, where young bloods had fought with pistols for the favor of their ladies at the bailles, and life had been lazy and rich with peace.

Now San Saba smacked of the boom

wildness of Denver. American energy pulsed on every side. There was little here, so far, to match the del Grazar saga his mother's memory had pictured for him.

Across the plaza activity boiled out of a saloon. Men's voices shouted angrily. A gunshot snapped through the somber dusk. From all directions men ran toward the spot.

Mike went with them; and when he stood on the outskirts of the crowd he heard a big, bearded cowman snort, "It was only a Mex he kilt! By God, the sooner we run 'em all outa here, the better we'll get along."

At the man's shoulder Mike spoke calmly. "They've been here a long time, mister. Couple of hundred years, haven't they?"

The big cowman wheeled on him, saw who had spoken, and snorted angrily again.

"What of it? *We're* here now, an' they git under our feet. If we don't like 'em, we'll run 'em out. How long you been around here?"

"One hour," Mike said mildly.

"I thought so. You'll learn better before you've been here long."

"Perhaps," Mike said civilly.

The crowd began to break up. Mike drifted along to the next saloon, and ordered a whiskey and drank it thoughtfully, and ordered another as the bar began to fill up with customers who had run out to watch the fracas.

At Mike's right elbow a lean man in the forties, with a drooping blond mustache over a thin-lipped mouth, called down the bar to a friend.

"I hear there's eight hundred head of Swallerfork cows comin' over from Pecos, Dave. Yuh meetin' 'em?"

"Not this trip, Blondy," the fourth man along the bar answered. "I've got too many things to do."

He was thick-chested and deep-voiced, that speaker. His dark-tanned face was broad and solid, and a heavy black mustache covered his strong mouth. His sombrero, black shirt and buckskin vest were dusty, as if he had ridden hard through the day.

Mike noticed particularly the man's powerful, stubby hands which looked as if they had always known work and power. Even the band of gold about one finger was broad, thick, massive, and Mike noted too that when the man spoke the others listened respectfully.

A few minutes later Mike spoke to the lean man beside him. "Are the del Grazars moving in more cattle?"

His answer was a loud, incredulous, "Huh? The del Grazars movin' in more cattle?" The speaker laughed loudly, called down the bar. "Dave, here's a young feller wants to know if the del Grazars are movin' in more cattle. Guess he's talkin' about the Swallerfork bunch you're bringin' over."

Others laughed. There was a general turning of heads to scan Mike. He smiled faintly at them, unabashed.

"Must be something wrong about that," he said. "I don't savvy it."

From further along the bar he got, again, "How long you been around these parts, mister?"

"I just rode in."

"Yuh sound like it," the speaker said, grinning. He had a sandy beard and big ears that seemed to spring straight out from the sides of his head. "The del Grazars are sellin' cattle, not buyin'," he grinned.

But the massive man with the heavy black mustache was not grinning. He had stepped back so that he could see Mike better; and Mike thought, as he met the direct gaze stabbing from under bushy black brows, that he had never seen eyes

so hard and coldly piercing. Except perhaps his father's eyes in anger. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Pride of the Dons

THE man called Dave spoke, and men fell silent, so that his deep voice struck hard on the sudden silence.

"Howcome a stranger like you is so interested in the del Grazars an' what they're doing?"

And again it seemed to Mike that tension grew on the room while everyone waited for his answer. He stood straight. Something in him struck fire against the steady gaze of the older man.

"I'm headed toward the Circle Half Moon ranch, and I wonder why you're so interested," Mike said. "Who are you?"

"Dave Schaal. An' you, stranger?"

Schaal was staring levelly. He seemed to be watching for any impression his name made. It had no effect. And when Mike answered coolly, "I'm Mike O'Grady," that name struck no response from Schaal.

"I take it," Schaal said deliberately—and he seemed to pick his words—"you're riding toward the Circle Half Moon to see the del Grazars. Are you intendin', maybe, to stop there?"

Several men close to Schaal were edging back out of the way. The tension in the room had tightened. Puzzled, Mike could not account for it; but his answer was quick and biting.

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't stop there? For I aim to, Schaal, if that's what you're leadin' up to."

The lean man with the drooping blond mustache had stayed at the bar beside Mike. Now his hand slapped suddenly to his gun. "You've showed your hand, I guess!" he exploded.

He was on Mike's left side. He had the odds, for Mike had to make a half turn while his gun came out. But as Mike's right hand flashed for his gun, his other hand flicked the knife from its leather sheath. The blade seemed a flowing line of steel that slashed across Blondy's gun knuckles before he was half through his draw.

Blondy yelled with pain. His gun clattered to the floor. He thrust his bleeding hand and its mate into the air as the knife point jabbed against his stomach.

Mike's other gun was covering the room, covering Dave Schaal who stood without moving while other men jumped back out of the line of fire.

"You wanted trouble—an' you've got it!" Mike snapped. His voice was hard, brittle, and behind it temper was blazing.

He noted half a dozen men standing taut, elbows crooked, and knew they were ready to draw. Strangely enough in that moment he was not afraid, although this was the first time he had looked so close at death.

Dave Schall's nod was almost approving. "That was quick work, O'Grady," he said quickly. "Put up your gun. You can walk out of here safely."

And such was the power of the man's personality that Mike believed him, and holstered his gun, and stepped back with the knife in his hand.

BLONDY had whipped a bandana around his bleeding knuckles. He spoke violently. "Are you lettin' this skunk walk out after he cut me this way?"

"You butted in when you wasn't asked," Schaal told him curtly. "He took you cold, an' if he'd been as gun-hungry as you are, he'd have slit your belly and emptied lead in it. Ain't you satisfied?"

Blondy swore. "He used that knife like a Mex! That ain't no way to fight! I'll get him for that!"

Blondy crowded back against the bar

as Mike made a sudden movement with the knife.

"My mother was a del Grazar," Mike said thinly. "Has anybody here got anything to say about it?"

They were stunned by that statement.

"I'll be damned!" one of the men exclaimed. "He—he said his name was O'Grady!"

Men looked at each other, at Mike, but mostly at Dave Schaal, whose bushy black eyebrows had raised in silent surprise.

"O'Grady—del Grazar," Schaal said, as if weighing a problem. He nodded to himself, spoke without visible emotion.

"Are they expectin' you at the Circle Half Moon?"

"That's my business, mister."

"There ain't any reason why you can't go," said Schaal. He looked about the room. "You hear that, boys? He can go." And then to Mike, Schaal said, "But if you're lookin' for old man Tony del Grazar, you'll find him in the big house just south of the courthouse. He's in town right now."

"You mean Don Antonio del Grazar?" Mike asked.

"He's Tony del Grazar to me," Schaal said indifferently. "You can see him here in San Saba, or at the Circle Half Moon, or anywhere between, for all I care. But you'd better clear out of here now. My men ain't exactly friendly to a del Grazar man."

Mike slipped the knife in its sheath, turned his back to them and walked out. And though he did not know it, his back was straight, his head was high, and he looked lean, pantherish and as threatening as a fine steel blade.

Dave Schaal noticed it. His eyes seldom missed anything. He was frowning thoughtfully as he turned to the bar and called for a whiskey.

THE moon was just rising when Mike came to the house beyond the courthouse. An oil lantern threw yellow light over a closed door in the high adobe yard wall. Antonita del Grazar had spoken of the free-handed hospitality in this never-closed town house of the del Grazars. But now the place looked subdued, deserted, withdrawn from the new excitement in the plaza. This mansion of a grandee's empire had become an old house drowsing in the backwater of a life new and strange to San Saba and the country about.

But Mike's pulses were racing as he tried the gate and found it locked. Through this gate his mother had often walked. This was home.

No one answered the knock. He tried again, and wondered what they would say. His throat tightened, he swallowed pain as he thought of her, who should be here with him.

He knocked a third time; and, as he stood there, a two-horse buggy came racing along the moon-touched, dusty street, and drew up beside him, the horses breathing hard, moving restlessly.

Mike's hat came into his hands as a girl spoke from the buggy. "You wish someone?"

"I'm looking for Don Antonio del Grazar, ma'am," Mike said.

"He should be in there. Is the gate locked? Here, I'm coming in."

Mike stepped to help her down.

Her hand was small, firm, cool on his, and her weight was light, and she was small and slender and smiling as she stepped into the yellow halo of the lantern. She was pretty, in the way Antonita del Grazar had been pretty, different from the blonde girls of the Oregon country.

A white lace mantilla over her hair and shoulders might have been protection against the cool night air; but it seemed

to Mike the mantilla was only a frame for her oval, smiling face.

"Isn't it kind of risky, riding alone at night this way, the way things are around here now?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she replied cheerfully, with the faintest breath of an accent back of her words.

She reached behind the lantern to a rawhide string which Mike had not noticed, and pulled it. A bell rang inside the gate. And at the same moment two riders turned the next corner and galloped toward them. The gate was still closed as they swung down from their saddles.

Mike's hand hovered near his gun until one of the men spoke in Spanish, irritably.

"Why did you drive off alone, Maria?"

She answered in Spanish, with an undertone of amusement. "I told you I would drive alone. I like it, at night, to drive alone."

The second man had stepped over by Mike. "Who is this man?" he asked.

"He was here at the gate. He wishes to see Don Antonio."

All that in Spanish; and then in English the first speaker addressed Mike. "I am Gregorio del Grazar. You wish to see my father?"

"Yes," Mike said.

"Your name please, and your business?" was the suspicious demand.

"My name is O'Grady," Mike said. He waited an instant, and when the name apparently had no meaning, added, "The business is important to me, if your father is here."

An elderly manservant opened the gate. Gregorio del Grazar hesitated, said: "Come in, Mr. O'Grady. I'll tell my father you wish to see him."

THE Gregorio del Grazar looked to be almost thirty. His skin was darker than the girl's skin. He was not quite as tall as Mike, but heavier, with a pudginess that suggested a love for good food. His lips were full under his black mustache, and he did not try to disguise the scowl which backed his unfriendly and hostile manner.

The second man was younger, slimmer, more wiry. He was unfriendly, too. He walked through the gate first with the girl, saying curtly in Spanish, "I will tell Don Antonio."

Behind the wall, beyond gnarled old trees, the house windows glowed softly. Through an open passage leading into a central patio Mike heard voices. He was not taken back in there after the girl and her escort.

Gregorio del Grazar conducted him into a square room at the left of the patio, entered through an outside door. Log beams, brown with age, held up the low ceiling, deer heads hung on the walls, and bear skins and mountain lion skins lay on the floor. The furniture was handmade and massive, with the dignity of simplicity, the soft patina of age.

They remained standing, eyeing one another.

"I have not seen you before," Gregorio del Grazar said stiffly.

Mike smiled faintly.

"I guess not," he said. "I just got to San Saba."

Gregorio frowned. "A stranger—and you have business with my father?" he persisted.

"That's right."

Gregorio continued to frown. "The name of O'Grady is familiar."

"Is it?" said Mike.

The man wore a black suit. The coat was open, revealing a silver-mounted revolver underneath. His hand remained near the revolver and he remained suspicious.

A door in the back of the room opened and a tall old man stepped in. He was

taller than Gregorio, taller than Mike. He was thin and gaunt, so that the skin was tight over his cheekbones and around his eyes. Hair and mustache were white, and his mouth was thin-lipped and bloodless, and his black suit hung slackly from square erect shoulders as he stopped and looked at Mike.

"I am Don Antonio del Grazar," he said coldly. "What do you want?"

Mike had lived twenty years for this moment. And now his chief thought was the antagonism these two men had for him. They did not know him, yet they disliked him, had barriers up against him. But of course it was because they did not know who he was.

In Spanish Mike spoke to the tall gaunt old man.

"Don Antonio, I am Miguel O'Grady."

Don Antonio stared without expression.

"I know no one by the name of O'Grady," he said—in English.

Mike tried again, in Spanish.

"Your sister, Antonita, was my mother. She—she died last week in Santa Fé."

A muscle twitched in Don Antonio's face. That was all. A single muscle under his eye twitched. "I have no sister by the name of Antonita," he said.

The room went very still. Mike felt the hot blood rushing into his cheeks. He heard his voice rasping with a sudden surge of bitter anger.

"You lie, damn you! You know you lie!"

Gregorio's hand made a sudden movement toward the revolver under his coat. Mike's own gun was out before the pudgy hand had drawn the silver-mounted weapon.

"*You,*" Mike flung out harshly, "keep out of this!"

The tall old man stood there. Like Dave Schaal he stood unmoved in the face of violence. Only Dave Schaal had been stolid, intent. This old man, eldest of four brothers, head of the del Grazar clan now, stood there coldly, bitterly, disdainfully. His brittle words fell on the silence of the room.

"My young sister, Antonita, died twenty-two years ago."

MIKE'S mind groped to understand it. Here was something twenty years of the Oregon country had never taught him. Here was a new kind of pride, bitter, unyielding pride that lasted without end, beyond the grave. Unjust pride that made him lash out:

"I'm damned ashamed I'm related to you! She never hurt you—any of you! She went off and lived her life the way she had a right to, and always was proud of her folks, and taught me to be proud of them! And all this time you've stayed here stiff-necked an' damning her!"

Don Antonio stood unmoved before that angry torrent. He was old, like the house, gaunt like the old trees outside, hard and unyielding in a way Mike had never met.

"You are not related to us," Don Antonio said coldly. "Your name is O'Grady, you say. Why do you come here to the del Grazars?"

"My mother wanted me to come."

"You have come," Don Antonio said bleakly. "Now you can go."

The door behind the old man was ajar. Mike thought he saw a wisp of movement there, passing, vanishing. In the silences, voices in that patio beyond the door were no longer audible. Even they had gone cool and silent when an O'Grady came under the roof.

Pride and anger flared against that implacable wall.

"I'll go when I'm ready—an' be damned glad to go!" Mike said hotly. "But first, while I'm here, what about my mother's share of the estate? You asked for it, an' by God you'll get it now, sir!"

For the first time Don Antonio displayed emotion. A flush crept into his gaunt face. His voice shook as he answered.

"I thought so. Only that could have brought you here. You have wasted your time. There is nothing for you."

"I guess," said Mike, "we'll see about that. I'm beginning to see why you never forgave her. Who got the lands she was supposed to get?"

Gregorio said then, softly. "Have you any papers to back up a claim?"

Don Antonio waved a gaunt hand toward the younger man. "My son is a lawyer. Doubtless he can give you good advice."

Caution checked the hot retort Mike was about to make, admitting he had brought no papers. His mind hadn't been on papers and land when he came. Gregorio's plump face was bland and slightly amused now. He knew, Mike saw, that Antonita del Grazar had taken no papers when she vanished with her husband. This Gregorio had studied law. He knew the tricks. And he was waiting with tricks when he should have been thinking of fairness, justice, right.

Mike let the muzzle of his gun drop down by his leg, and grinned at them, father and son. His grin was bitter, cold, bleak.

"I didn't come for the law, an' I won't talk law," he said in English. "But I'm here in San Saba an' I'll stay. Think it over, you two buzzards, an' don't forget I'm half del Grazar, although I'm ashamed to say it now. *You*—never mind about showing me out. I'll find the way."

Gregorio paused in his advance toward the door, and stood motionless while Mike backed to the door, watching them. Perhaps Gregorio did not catch the meaning. But Don Antonio did. His thin, bloodless lips pressed into a tight line as he stood tall and erect and watched his visitor leave without exposing his back.

The del Grazar pride writhed bitterly at that lack of trust.

Outside under the gnarled old trees Mike holstered his gun and drew a deep breath. He was cold inside with the dead enthusiasms of a lifetime. Behind the thick door he had just closed the del Grazars were now remote and strange. Beyond the old adobe wall was the San Saba plaza and the future.

The aged manservant was not at the gate. Mike found the wooden bar that locked the gate, lifted it, and stepped outside. And as the gate closed behind him and the wooden bar thudded softly into place, a voice at his elbow said:

"I heard what happened—and I am sorry, Mr. O'Grady."

CHAPTER THREE

The Law of Gunsmoke

SHE stood there in the moonlight with the white lace mantilla across her arm. She was earnest, regretful, sincere. The saddle horses and the buggy had been taken away. They were alone as Mike whipped off his broad-brimmed hat and looked down at her.

"Thanks," he said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "I'm glad there's someone in the family like—like I thought I'd find."

"But I," she said, "am not a del Grazar. I am Maria Guadalupe Sedillo, and it is none of my business. I should not be out here. But I do not want you to go away without understanding."

Mike's laugh was short and hard; perhaps to hide the dull dead feeling inside. "I understand well enough. They made it plain."

She shook her head. "No. Don Antonio only said what he could say. He

is an old, bitter man. He cannot change. I think sometimes he is a little desperate because he cannot change, and too proud to be anything but bitter about it."

"You're talkin' riddles to me, ma'am," Mike said. "I heard what he told me, an' it was plain enough. He wouldn't even admit my mother was his sister. He was afraid I wanted something he had—an' all I wanted at first was to be friends."

"To him you are a gringo, and he hates all gringos."

"My mother was his sister," Mike insisted doggedly.

"But that was a long time ago. I have heard about it. She went against the custom, and in those days the custom was everything."

"Ma'am," said Mike coldly, "what has custom got to do with a girl who's in love—or with family ties? She was his sister; she was one of the family. An' they've hated her memory for twenty-two years because she had the nerve to go against their selfish ideas. Her brothers, I guess, kept on hating her because they grabbed her share of the land and wanted to keep it."

Maria Guadalupe Sedillo was troubled as she stood there in the moonlight looking up at him.

"The custom," she said, "was everything. How can I make you see? The Conquistadores, hundreds of years ago, were few, and the country was big, and they were proud, for, one man against a thousand they had conquered. They were wise, too. They knew if they did not keep their blood pure, their grandchildren and those who followed their grandchildren would be no better than the Indians from whom they had taken the land. They must not marry out of their people. For two hundred years the del Grazars kept the custom, and held their own, and were proud and strong."

Mike shifted restlessly. "My father was as good as any of them, ma'am."

She smiled, sadly. "But he was not of the blood. He was a stranger, no different to these del Grazars than the Indians, and the peons whose blood was thick with Indian blood. He laughed at the custom, and your mother broke the custom, and from then on she was dead to them."

Maria Sedillo put her hand on Mike's arm, earnestly. "Señor O'Grady, you do not know what the custom of two hundred years can be. When she married outside the blood, she struck at every member of the family who was proud of his name."

MIKE said nothing. He was looking down at her, thinking he had never seen a girl so lovely. Her touch was light, her voice was soft; in her native Spanish it would ripple softer, and her earnest sympathy was like balm to raw wounds.

She took his silence for bitter disagreement, and sighed.

"It was not only that," she said sadly. "Your father was the first American to defeat the del Grazars. It was almost a sign. Since then many more Americans have come. We could hold back the Indians—but the Americans are worse than the grasshoppers. The grasshoppers go and there is plenty again—but the Americans stay, and devour and take. Don Antonio is old and wise. I have heard him talk. We can't hold the country against them. They get the land by trickery and force, and take the trade. Our young men are not strong. They drink, gamble, and grow wild and helpless when they try to be like the Americans, as many of them do. More Americans are coming in all the time. They say the railroad is coming too, so that thousands more will come. There is nothing for the old people but bitterness and hate for all Americans. Your father was the first,

Señor O'Grady. The del Grazars have lost much since then. You will always be a gringo to Don Antonio—and he can do nothing but hate you."

"How about you, ma'am?" Mike asked awkwardly.

She shrugged. "I do not matter. I am only a woman—and too young to hate. But I can be a little sad at what is happening. And I am sorry for you, for you would not have come here if you were not *simpatico*. But you see now you must go back where you came from. They will never have you."

Mike laughed shortly. "I'm here," he said. "I'll stay. If I'm a gringo, I'll be a gringo, an' take what's mine. *I* wasn't raised to follow the custom."

She smiled sadly. "You see, you are American—like your father. You are alone. There are many of them. Forget this San Saba country, Señor O'Grady."

"Forget it?" Mike said. He wasn't feeling dead inside now. Far from it. "I'm just starting to know it," he said. "And if anything happens to me, here's my thanks for your sweetness—an' something to remember me by."

Mike bent quickly and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'll be back," he promised.

Maria Guadalupe Sedillo gasped and stepped away. She was standing against the wall in the moonlight, poised for flight as Mike left.

But she did not cry out. Mike remembered that as he made for the plaza. . . .

THE San Saba plaza was vastly different from that shadowy old yard with its ancient trees. That was the past. This was the present, the future, boiling with gringo energy.

The barkeep in the saloon told Mike that Dave Schaal had gone to the Boston House. New built of adobe bricks, the hotel lobby was filled with the same strange mixture of men that flowed through the plaza.

The clerk said, "Dave Schaal? I think he's in the dining room."

Mike remembered then that he was hungry and walked into the dining room. He saw Dave Schaal sitting with a young woman. The other tables were filled. Mike noticed the young woman eyeing him, saw her speak to Schaal, and Schaal beckoned to him.

"Sit down, if you're waiting to eat," was Schaal's surprising invitation. Everything the man did was surprising. He stood up and said, "Miss Hartman, this is Mr. O'Grady."

She smiled. "How do you do, Mr. O'Grady? Won't you sit down?"

Young, blonde, dainty, petite, she was like no other young woman Mike had ever met. He had heard an Englishman talk as she did, and knew she was from England.

Near to being tongue-tied, he managed to say, "Thank you, ma'am," and sat down without quite knowing why he did so.

"Not eating at the del Grazar's?" Schaal asked calmly.

"No," Mike replied woodenly. "I was looking for you."

Schaal regarded him thoughtfully. "You can talk in front of Miss Hartman," he said. "Her father's one of the owners of the TVO ranch, which I manage—if you don't know it already."

"I don't," Mike said. "I was wondering if you had a job for me."

It was Schaal's turn to be startled. "Why?" he demanded bluntly.

"I think you're the man to fit in with my plans," Mike told him coolly.

"Do you?" said Schaal with irony. "What are your plans?"

"Do they matter?"

"You're hired," Schaal said.

Miss Hartman laughed. "I should take that as a compliment, Mr. O'Grady. I've never seen Dave hire a man so carelessly."

"I've met O'Grady before," Schaal said wryly. "I'm gambling he can savvy Spanish. How about it, O'Grady?"

"You win."

"I'm going to send you out alone," Schaal said promptly. "To Ojo Grande. Ever hear of the place?"

"No."

"It ain't a nice place for a gringo to be caught alone," Schaal stated calmly. "It's over in the del Grazar grant. Apaches are thick and the Mexicans hate gringos. Last time I was through there I had nine men along and didn't feel I had too many. They sure hate us back in there."

"So you're sending me there alone?" Mike said, and his was the irony this time.

Schaal spoke across the table readily. "Twenty men couldn't get the information I want. One man passing for a Mexican could. Can you handle it?"

"Go out and spy for you?" Mike said curtly.

Schaal's eyes were hard, cold under his black brows. "Call it anything you want, O'Grady. Our interests are clashing with the del Grazars'. They've had the odds on their side from the first. We've suffered from them. I need to know what they're doing. Yesterday I got a tip that Juan Sarrero, the Mexican bandit, had been seen heading toward Ojo Grande from the Border. I'm wondering who's going to hear from him if he breaks loose—and if the del Grazars will have anything to do with it. A Mexican riding through Ojo Grande will hear things a gringo won't."

The ghost of a smile appeared under Schaal's black mustache. "It won't be so good if they find out you're a gringo."

"I'll go," Mike decided.

THAT was all there was to it; yet Mike had the feeling these two had been talking about him before he entered the dining room, and that Miss Hartman knew everything about that brush in the saloon and was curious about him.

They spoke casually of other things—the new mines, chances of the railroad coming, of the Oregon country. Miss Hartman was witty, interesting, and Mike thought her chuckle one of the nicest he had ever heard.

Schaal said, "I'll see you before you leave tomorrow. If you need any money, ask for it."

"I'll draw my wages when I've worked for them," Mike said.

All the beds in San Saba were taken. In the end Mike had to sleep in the haymow of the livery stable. Up early, he washed in a bucket back of the livery, ate breakfast in a little restaurant run by a Chinaman, and stopped in a barber shop for a shave.

Then he bought a rifle, scabbard, a soft leather suit with silver buttons on the coat, and a high-crowned sombrero in the Mexican style. As an afterthought he added a pair of big-roweled Mexican spurs.

Leaving the purchases at the livery stable, he drifted about the plaza until noon, asking casual questions whenever he had the opportunity. By noon he had a good idea of what it was all about.

The TVO was a new, big spread, formed of a chunk of former del Grazar land, some small purchases from natives, some leased land, and a lot of free range which the del Grazars claimed by right of usage, and which the TVO was taking up as it saw fit.

The TVO was backed by English capital, which also was interested in two of the new mines. The Lazy N ranch, also English, and the Circle Tin Cup, owned

by an American named Griffin were all crowding the del Grazars.

After eating at noon Mike went to a Spanish lawyer by the name of Gonzales.

"My mother was a sister of Don Antonio del Grazar," he told the man in Spanish. "She got none of the estate. What can you tell me about it?"

Gonzales was a short man, almost diminutive, quick in his movements, soft-voiced, polite to his caller. But his smile vanished at Mike's statement. He looked startled.

"What was your mother's name?" he asked.

"Antonita del Grazar."

"Ah, yes. I remember her. It was a long time ago. And she is—?"

"She's gone."

Gonzales looked uneasy. "You will have trouble in the matter at this late time."

"I'm only asking you about it."

"By law, perhaps, the claim might be established," Gonzales said vaguely. "Who knows? Getting it would be a different matter. I remember it was said long ago she would get nothing."

"Was there a will?"

Gonzales shrugged. *"Quien sabe*—who knows? Such matters were often vague—by word of mouth before witnesses."

"Then, if there wasn't a will, the law would give her a share, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, I am not the court," said Gonzales vaguely.

It was plain the mention of an action against the del Grazars left this lawyer with very little enthusiasm. On the other hand, there must be ground for action or Gonzales would deny it point-blank. Mike had what he wanted. He had gone to Gonzales because he had heard the man was one of the oldest lawyers in town.

He left and went to a newer lawyer—an American, by the name of Johnson. Bluff, hearty, red-faced, aggressive, Johnson heard his story.

"You've got a damn good case," he said flatly. "It'll be a tough one, but I can get you action on it. The del Grazars ain't had too much luck lawin' in the courts the last few years. We got American law here now. It backfires in their faces."

"I'll leave some money with you," Mike said. "Get to work on it. If I've got to sign any papers, make 'em out quick because I'm leavin' town."

Mike rode west out of San Saba that afternoon, toward the mountains. He was in the foothills at dark, broiling a rabbit he had shot from the saddle. Later he sprawled on the blankets by the small fire, smoking, musing on the events of the past twenty-four hours.

He was thinking of Maria Sedillo and the pink-cheeked Miss Hartman when his hobbled horse snorted uneasily in the darkness. Mike rolled over, peering in that direction; and at the same instant a rifle cracked sharply nearby. The fire geysered sparks as a bullet struck the embers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhack Bullets

MIKE lunged off the blankets toward his saddle and rifle. That probably saved his life, for a second shot lashed an instant after the first, striking the blankets where he had been.

Snatching the rifle from its scabbard, Mike dove half a dozen feet to the bank of a small dry arroyo by which he had camped.

Two more bullets sought him as he went down the bank in a cascade of gravel. He landed on the arroyo sand and lay still.

The camp was in a small draw bisected

by the arroyo. The ridges siding the draw were covered with a sparse growth of cane cactus and prickly pear, and an occasional stunted tree. The moon was not yet up, and the wavering little fire made small impression against the darkness.

Revolver in one hand, rifle in the other, Mike lay on the sand listening. No one approached. After a little he wriggled up the arroyo a short distance and waited again.

Sheltered by a four-foot bank he waited for a full hour before he heard a branch crack over toward the fire. Some minutes later something struck the ground near the dying fire.

Mike guessed it was a stick, tossed to draw him out if he was alive. Crouching behind the arroyo bank, he waited.

The moon was rising, but not yet over the ridge when his continued silence was taken as proof that one of the bullets had found him as he fell into the arroyo. But at that he was almost caught off-guard.

A faint slither of sound up the arroyo drew his attention that way. Someone was tiptoeing over the sand. Revolver cocked, Mike waited. Twice he thought he saw a darker blot moving on him. Each time he was mistaken. And in the end the man was not ten feet away when he discovered Mike, and gasped audibly and opened fire.

Mike shot at the same instant—twice—three times—and then the man was down in the sand motionless, and Mike felt the smart of a bullet scratch on his left arm.

Near the fire a voice called sharply in Spanish, *"Santiago!"*

A bullet toward the spot sent the man running away. There had been only two of them. A few minutes later Mike cupped a match over the dead man's head. It was a brown-skinned Mexican, stone dead.

MIKE rode west again, wondering about the ambush. He must have been followed out of San Saba. The men might have picked him for an easy victim—or have had orders to bushwhack him.

Near midnight he made a second camp far from the road in the mouth of a small canyon. There, without a fire, he slept in his blankets until the sun came up.

Before starting on, he changed into the soft leather trousers and coat, strapped on the big Spanish spurs. His skin was already well-tanned by the Oregon sun. He had worn the high-crowned sombrero out of San Saba. He had no mirror, but he thought he looked the part.

For two days he vanished in the mountains. When he came out of them, far to the west, he rode half a day before he met a wagon with two escorting riders. All were Mexicans.

"Buenos tardes," Mike greeted them. "When will I get to Ojo Grande?"

They told him he had a day's ride yet. They were polite, friendly. Cigarettes were smoked while they chatted in Spanish. The man said they had met seven Apaches that morning who had seemed peaceful—but who could tell about the Apaches?

Mike rode on, satisfied with his appearance. The men had removed their hats and given him the politeness due a superior.

That night he slept in the adobe hut of a sheepherder beside the road. Five houses were clustered at the spot. From his host Mike learned that six years before the Apaches had killed a man and three women here. But the Apaches were quiet now, and the señor knew it was a will of God that poor men had to live somewhere. The del Grazars had sheep which must be tended, and someone had to live near the sheep.

The next morning, Mike left with chili,

boiled beans and fried mutton under his belt, and they saw him on his way as if he were a del Grazar himself.

He had ridden through mountains and across broad plains spotted with stands of trees. There had been tall pine forests and great stretches covered with scattered piñon trees and short grass. The land here to the west was different from the desert-like stretches along the Rio Grande. Now the mountains to the south were higher, more rugged. The valleys widened out. During the day's ride small huts appeared with increasing frequency.

Mike found it hard to believe that most of the time he had been riding across del Grazar land; that the Mexicans he saw had probably never known anything but del Grazar authority. All were armed. To him they were polite—but it was easy to believe a lone *Yanqui* would find them dangerous.

In the afternoon the road followed a shallow mountain stream. Small, irrigated fields appeared. An hour before sunset the road skirted a wooded ridge and then dropped down an easy grade into Ojo Grande.

Different from any settlement he had known in the Oregon country, Ojo Grande was half a hundred houses or more clustered without plan beside the river. Some were of adobe brick, others were of small tree trunks set vertically and chinked with mud. In any direction the mountain slopes were close. The setting was isolated, wild, lonely.

Dogs barked, children cried shrill warning of a stranger's coming, women stared from doorways, men lifted hats in greeting as Mike rode in among the houses.

Dave Schaal had told him he would find a combination store and saloon run by one of the minor satellites of the del Grazar clan, and it would be the only trading point in a great distance. Not that there was much trade.

Mike found a tiny bare plaza. Among the houses on one side was a small church, on the other the store, with several saddled horses at a pole hitchrack. Eyeing the horses as he dismounted, Mike decided no Mexican bandit had ridden any of them in. No self-respecting bandit would own such sorry animals, or dilapidated riding gear.

Big-roweled spurs jingling, Mike entered the dim interior of the store. Half a dozen Mexicans lounging about inside stared at him.

"Buenos tardes, señores," Mike greeted them with a lift of his hand.

They stared, hesitated. One man removed his hat, the others followed suit in respectful, friendly greeting.

Mike stopped a faint smile. They had accepted him as one of the *gente fina,* who expected a bared head and subservient greeting as a matter of course.

A plank bar ran along one side of the room. Mike waved a hand graciously toward it. "Señores," he said politely, "you will drink with me?"

THEY would, enthusiastically. A one-eyed Mexican, lighter-skinned than the others, served them. Other men drifted in, and when Mike carelessly tossed a gold piece on the boards and called for a second round, there was no doubt among the company that Ojo Grande was honored by a *caballero* of distinction.

"I have come a long way," Mike said. "I am tired. Is there a place I can stay a little?"

A dozen men offered their beds so insistently it was plain acceptance would confer an honor.

Mike chose the one-eyed man, who lived in an el-shaped wing behind the store. No one was offended. They accepted it as natural that the señor would choose the best.

The one-eyed man's name, Mike was

not surprised to find, was Ricardo del Grazar. Somewhere back through two centuries this branch of the family had slipped down to humble status. But he was still a del Grazar, above the still more humble natives.

Mike gave his name as Señor Miguel Lucero. Everybody seemed satisfied. None more so than his flattered host. Ricardo del Grazar personally sat his guest at table an hour later, served Mike's plate with his own hands, and gave sharp orders to his wife and daughters who served silently, and remained outside the room while the men ate.

"Señor Lucero," this del Grazar said with emotion, as he smoothed his greasy black mustache with the back of his hand, "your kindness has made me most happy. Not often does a *caballero* so honor us. My kinsmen, the del Grazars of the valley, do not often come so far from the river. Don Antonio del Grazar, as you doubtless know, is a cousin. Yes, señor, a cousin."

"Ah—Don Antonio," Mike said politely. "I was in his *casa* the other day, in San Saba. And Gregorio—but you know Gregorio, eh?"

"We are the same family, señor," Mike was assured hastily, and taken to his host's bosom from that moment. It was proof, if any were needed, of the standing of Don Antonio del Grazar's branch of the family.

After the food, Mike lighted a cigarette and dallied with a glass of wine.

"There are many gringos in San Saba," he suggested.

The empty eye socket gave a malevolent cast to the scowl the remark evoked. Ricardo cursed the gringos heartily.

"They are taking the country like wolves! But not near us, señor. *Dios*, but we have a way of dealing with those coyotes when they appear."

"I have heard," Mike smiled thinly. He drew a forefinger across his throat.

His host showed bad teeth in an answering grin. "Gregorio, my dear cousin, says a dead gringo is better than a live one. Ah, that Gregorio, he is a great man, señor. He has studied the law."

"But the American sheriff at San Saba," Mike suggested. "Is he not curious when one of his countrymen disappear?"

"Ojo Grande is not San Saba, Señor Lucero. What is the law in San Saba to us? We del Grazars have always made our own law—and here in Ojo Grande we follow the old ways."

"Bueno, compadre, the old ways," Mike mused; and at being called *compadre* his host was almost overcome with pride and affection. His hand trembled with emotion as he filled Mike's glass and slopped more wine into his own.

"Si, compadre—si, si," he assented thickly.

Mike spoke carefully, casually. "I was told strangers from across the Border might come here to Ojo Grande."

"Dios, what manner of strangers, *compadre?"* Ricardo asked with interest. He hiccoughed, gulped at his wine, swiped the back of his hand across his mouth again, and sprawled his elbows on the table. The wine was having its effect.

Mike shrugged. *"Quien sabe?"* he said.

Ricardo hiccoughed again. "If they are friends of my dear cousin, Gregorio, they are friends of mine, *por Dios!"* he swore enthusiastically. "I, Ricardo del Grazar, will welcome them like brothers. When will they come?"

"Quien sabe," Mike said, using that vague term applicable to most anything. He finished his wine and ended the meal before the other was too drunk to stand.

The store that evening was a focus for all the men of Ojo Grande, and a good many of the women, who suddenly found things they needed to buy. To stay out of sight would have made talk. Mike kept

near the bar and bought drinks generously.

By the time two fights had started and a good time was being had by everyone, Mike asked his one-eyed host where he was to sleep. Staggering noticeably, Ricardo guided him to a smelly little room at the back of the house.

When he was alone, Mike decided the Señora del Grazar and her daughters had been unceremoniously evicted from this room for the night. But that was a family matter. Pulling off his boots, he lay down in his clothes as a matter of precaution. The last sounds he heard were guitars and singing in the store.

And the next thing Mike knew, he was being yanked out of bed and slammed onto the floor.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Firing Squad

THE little room was dark. Swearing violently, Mike tried to free himself. A fist hammered at his face. Hands now gripped his arms and legs and held him helpless.

Above his head a voice panted, *"Esta bueno, señor!"*

Across the room another voice snapped in Spanish, "Hold him! Pedro, the light, *quick!*"

Mike knew that voice. A match was scratched in the next room. A man sidled through the doorway holding a candle.

Gregorio del Grazar stood inside the doorway, with a revolver in his hand.

The pudgy son of Don Antonio del Grazar was now wearing leather trousers, a cowhide jacket, silk neckerchief, fancy sombrero and a gun belt. Leather gloves were tucked under the belt. Gregorio had a braided leather quirt in his left hand as he stepped forward and smiled down at Mike.

"Buenas noches, cousin. Who would have thought to look for you here in Ojo Grande?"

"Go to hell," Mike said shortly. "Did you follow me here with these men?"

The three men who held him on the floor, and the fourth with the candle were strangers. Mexicans, wearing guns and knives, they were dirty and dusty, as if they had been riding hard a long distance.

Gregorio shrugged. He looked tired but satisfied.

"Why should I follow you? I have men to do that for me. I rode this way on business, and along the road we heard of the young *caballero* ahead of us. So polite, so *simpatico.* So we rode hard to give you the welcome of the del Grazars."

"Well, you got here," Mike said. "Is this the welcome?"

Gregorio holstered his gun. He looked cheerful and full of good will.

"Of course not, cousin," he chuckled. "This is not the welcome you deserve, is it? But this is, eh?"

Mike turned his head quickly, but the whistling quirt cut a hot furrow across the side of his face.

One of the men laughed—and then it took all three of them to hold their prisoner down.

"If I ever get my hands free, I'll kill you for that!" Mike gasped wildly.

"Dios, I wanted to give you that in San Saba," Gregorio sighed. "Now I will sleep better. It is good you were not killed outside of San Saba."

"So you sent those skunks after me!"

"Oh, *si,* cousin," Gregorio agreed very amiably. "Did you think I would forget you? Gonzales was not the man to tell of your plans. He has taken too much of our money in his life." Gregorio pulled at his lower lip. "You didn't come here about that," he decided. "What brought you here?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, you scut?" Mike jeered

The quirt slashed him across the face again. But only Gregorio's smoldering eyes betrayed a savage anger. The pudgy face continued to smile.

"You went to Schaal," Gregorio said. "I can guess the rest. Well, you can have the night to think it over. But be careful, cousin. The fellow at your left arm is a brother of the man you killed. He is only waiting for an excuse to slit your throat."

Gregorio chuckled at the thought, and motioned to the men, and stood with his gun out while they turned Mike over on his face and lashed his arms behind him with a leather riata.

They jerked him to his feet and hustled him into the next room, where other candles had been lighted. The one-eyed man was standing pallid and frightened beside the table, nervously puffing at a cigarette. An instant later he dropped the cigarette and squealed as the riata slashed him.

Gregorio's plump face showed fury as he quirted the howling man into a corner of the room.

"Cabron! Castrow! Perro!" Gregorio bawled at him. "Is it for this we have you here at Ojo Grande? To give up your bed to gringos! To make a fool of yourself! To let him get you drunk so all the gringos laugh at us when they hear of it!"

"For the love of God, *patrón!* I did not know! Mother of Mercy, you are killing me! He said he was the *caballero* Lucero! How could a poor *pelón* like me tell he was a gringo? *Aie, patrón!*"

The victim was on his knees by then, cringing as he tried to shield his head.

In the next room the women and girls began to wail. Gregorio kicked his cowering relative down on the floor and then stepped back panting.

"Tell your women to get food for us!" he ordered viciously. "Where is the key to the store cellar?"

Mike was dragged into the back of the store, where tobacco smoke still showed blue against the burning lamps. He caught a glimpse of faces pressed against the front windows as he was dragged into a back storeroom. He was tripped up and thrown to the floor again. His legs were hog-tied behind him. A trap door lifted in the floor. They slid him, bumping from step to step, down into a damp dark cellar which reeked of wine and whiskey and stored supplies.

Gregorio then called down, "A pleasant night, cousin. In the morning we will see."

The trap door dropped into place. Mike heard the lock snap and the men walk away.

BY MORNING Mike was haggard and seething with black fury. His arms, strained back too tight, had been numb for hours. The pain had been pretty bad until the numbness replaced it. Footsteps above told him it was morning, but some time passed before men came down to get him.

They unfastened his legs and ordered him up; in the end they had to drag him up and carry him out back of the store, and hold him on his feet while he got back the use of his legs.

Gregorio strolled out into the early morning sunshine picking his teeth.

"Buenos dias, cousin, he said cheerfully. "Did you rest well last night?"

"Tell these fools to unloosen my arms for a little or I'll get gangrene in 'em," Mike said curtly.

"A nice idea if we could wait," Gregorio said cheerfully.

He gave the man the order and watched warily with his gun out while they held Mike's free arms and walked him in a circle. Gradually blood crept back into starved tissues.

Then with rawhide strings they tied his

arms in front of him, and led him over to a pole corral where horses, Mike's horse included, were saddled. The men were ready to ride.

"Where are we going?" Mike now demanded.

For a reply he was ordered to get in the saddle.

"How about some water and breakfast?" Mike asked.

"Why waste good food, cousin?" Gregorio answered amiably. "Get on your horse."

The man whose brother Mike had shot jabbed him with a knife point. There was nothing to do but climb awkwardly into the saddle, let them tie his feet, and hold to the saddle horn as his horse was led away.

Ricardo bowed them away obsequiously, his one good eye glaring hate at Mike. In the background the entire population of Ojo Grande clustered to watch the departure. Taunts, oaths, and threats were called to the prisoner by men who had been flattered when the *caballero* noticed them the evening before.

They rode south out of Ojo Grande, skirting the mountains. Mystified, Mike wondered what they were up to. One thing seemed certain—the chances were slim he'd never see San Saba again.

They rode all morning into the south—and Gregorio was in such high humor he broke into song now and then. The sun was high and hot when they turned off the trace of a road they had been following and cut east into the hills.

Here was lonely country again. Hours back they had passed the last of the outlying Mexican huts. They rode up a rocky canyon sided by bleak cliffs, and Mike would have sworn he was the first American to come this way. His escort seemed to know where they were going however.

The canyon pinched out. They rode up over a steep thousand-foot arm of the mountain, and plunged down through the thick growth on the other side to a narrow, grassy valley bisected by a small stream.

And in the valley just ahead of them was a long picket line of horses and the compact trail camp of at least twenty men. One look at the hard-faced men in tight trousers, huge, high-crowned sombreros, many of woven straw, who waited with guns ready told Mike the story.

Juan Sarrero, the bandit had avoided Ojo Grande. But Gregorio had known where to find him.

SARRERO was not hard to recognize. He stepped out from his men as Gregorio dismounted. They shook hands. Sarrero was a chunky, heavy-set man, solid, muscular and middle-aged. Gold buttons were sewed up the side of his tight trousers and liberally over his snug coat. His felt sombrero was banded with silver braid, and his huge spurs were silver. But the two big revolvers he wore looked business-like, and his dark-skinned face had a hard, cold cast.

"Diablo," he exclaimed as he shook hands. "I thought you were not coming. We have been here three days."

"Yesterday was the day agreed on, Sarrero."

"Señor Sarrero, if you will, Don del Grazar."

Gregorio hesitated. *"Si, Señor* Sarrero," he said sulkily.

He had tried to be haughty, had been covertly insulted by having the Don hooked up to his last name, and had been forced into sulky politeness. That put Sarrero in good humor.

"Did you bring the first payment?" he asked.

"Si. Gold—in my saddlebags."

"Bueno," said Sarrero, staring at Mike. "We will talk about it while we eat. Who is this man?"

"A gringo for you—to deal with as you wish."

"What shall I do with him?"

Gregorio shrugged. "I don't want to see him again."

Sarrero smiled and touched the end of his mustache. "That will be easy," he said. "Let him eat with us now while I hear about him."

"Food will not help him."

Sarrero grinned again. "My guests do not stay hungry. Bring him to the fire."

Portions of a deer were roasting over a long bed of coals. A squatting man was making tortillas in a large flat rock nestled in the glowing coals. Coffee was boiling in a big pot.

Sarrero snapped an order. His men hustled Mike off the horse, led him to the fire and sat him down with his hands still tied in front of him.

A tin plate holding small chunks of hot venison and two tortillas, and a cup of black coffee, were put on the ground beside him. Sarrero and Gregorio were served the same way. The other men grabbed plates and cups and helped themselves, laughing and talking as they began to wolf the food.

Sarrero's men looked as hard-cased as their leader. All were heavily armed with the latest type weapons, and belts and *bandoliers* of cartridges. Their clothes were fancy, their riding gear the best. Banditry had evidently treated them well south of the Border.

They had brought along pack horses and spare horses, and looked prepared to live off the country as long as they cared to. They were in high spirits as they ate. Mike heard some of them questioning Gregorio's men about himself.

But as he made clumsy shift of the food with his bound hands, he listened to Sarrero and Gregorio talking beside him. Their conversation indicated that Gregorio had sent a man south of the Border to suggest what was wanted and to arrange this meeting with the bandit where the plans would be completed. Back here in the Ojo Grande country no one would know a Mexican bandit band was within striking distance of the river settlements.

Speaking emphatically in Spanish, Gregorio said:

"These gringos are robbing the grass from above ground and the silver from under the ground. They treat us like dogs—we who have been here two hundred years. They forced their *Yanqui* law on us, and now they win in the courts and kill when we try to protect our rights. Before God, it is not right! I will do something about it."

Sarrero clapped his guest on the shoulder.

"Don Gregorio, you are a man after my own heart!" he cried heartily. "What is it you are paying me to do?"

"The gringo ranches near us are taking our land, and gringo mines are unjustly on our land," Gregorio said, scowling over the injuries he was listing. "And there is one ranch and one man who leads all the rest. The TVO brand and the man named Schaal who has charge of it. If his buildings are burned down, himself and his men killed off, and their cattle run off, it would be easier for us."

"And what of the fighting I will have to do?"

"I am paying you well. You will have cattle to sell if you can get them over the Border. There are mines you can raid for silver and gold. But if you wipe out these ranches next to our land, no mine raid will pay you better than will the del Grazars."

SARRERO pulled the cork from a bottle of wine with his teeth and tilted the bottle up. Smacking his lips, he jammed the cork back in and asked, "Why

not hire gringo gunmen and do this yourself?"

Gregorio spat and scowled at Mike. "Who can trust a gringo? We del Grazars have nothing to do with them."

"*Si, si,*" Sarrero chuckled. "They are *muy malo,* eh? Now about the mine called La Angelita—and the mine called La Gloria?"

"Those are our mines!" Gregorio snapped. "They must not be touched!"

"But they are rich mines, eh? I have heard so. Your *Mejicano* workmen take out much rich ore, and you take the silver from the ore at your hacienda."

"Not much," Gregorio denied with sudden caution.

"I have heard differently," Sarrero blandly declared. "I have heard there is a cellar in the rock under the *casa* of Don Antonio del Grazar filled with silver bars, and sacks of gold. Some of it's been there since his grandfather was little."

"You heard lies," Gregorio insisted.

"Amigo," Sarrero chuckled, "you are a man after my own heart. Oh, *si.* I love you like a brother. But I have heard different about the rock cellar—and God has not been generous with us lately."

Gregorio suddenly was uneasy as Sarrero put his empty plate aside and wiped his hands on his trousers. The uneasiness changed to fear as Sarrero drew one of his guns carelessly.

"I have been thinking, amigo," the bandit chuckled, "that these gringos are *muy malo hombres.* Ah, *Dios,* we have met them on the Border. They are bad fighters. Perhaps they don't like to be killed so easily. But if we go to that little rock cellar under the *casa,* it will be so easy. No? So very easy. You have no gringos on your land. Only these soft *Nuevo Mejicans,* like yourself, whom we laugh at across the Border. It will be easy getting into that rock cellar. And if we shoot everyone we find, we will be beyond the Border before there is trouble. Perhaps these gringos at San Saba would not even ride after us."

Gregorio gulped. His pudgy face had suddenly paled. He cast a wild look around. Mike had already noticed that when Juan Sarrero put his plate aside, his men had unobtrusively left their food and gathered about the four del Grazar riders. Two of them had strolled up behind Gregorio.

Sarrero nodded at them. They caught Gregorio's arms, hauled him to his feet. And at the same moment the four men were made prisoners also.

Mike laughed harshly at the look on Gregorio's face.

"Cousin," he said, "your pet snake has bit you. If ever I saw a dirty skunk stink himself up, this is it. What you put me through is worth it."

The del Grazar pride was still there. When Sarrero said, "Now we will talk about that silver, and how to get to it, and how many men we will find," Gregorio said defiantly, "I will tell you nothing!"

"Like a burro, he needs the whip," Sarrero sighed.

At his orders, Gregorio was thrown down on the ground. His boots were yanked off. Grinning men held him down while the bottoms of his feet were beaten with a stick.

A little of that was enough. Sobbing, groaning, Gregorio babbled ready answers to the questions.

Grim-faced now, a little sick, Mike had leaned forward when Gregorio named Maria Sedillo as one of those at the del Grazar ranch.

He would have stopped the thing if possible; he would have interfered if there was a chance when Gregorio, limping on his lacerated feet, was led off with his men toward the heavy brush through which they had recently ridden.

Sarrero picked up the wine bottle and drank again.

"Savee *Español?*" he asked Mike, who had not spoken as yet.

"Si."

"He is a fool," Sarrero said contemptuously, nodding after the little party. "And fools were made to be plucked. His kind play the grandee and shout for our necks until there is trouble, and then they come down in the dust to us for help. *Dios,* never have I seen a gringo look such a *caballero,"* Sarrero said, grinning as he looked over the wine bottle at Mike. "Why did he want you dead, amigo? And his quirt has been across your face, eh? Why?"

Grinning thinly, Mike said, "He doesn't like *Americanos."*

Sarrero grinned back and drank some more wine. "That is no reason," he said, drawing a deep breath. "He does not count now. We will forget him, eh?" A ragged volley of shots came from the brush. Sarrero chuckled. *"Si,* we will forget him," he repeated. "I like you, amigo. I would like to be your friend."

Awkwardly Mike got to his feet and stared narrow-eyed as the other drank leisurely once more from the bottle.

"I would like to be your friend," Sarrero repeated sadly, lowering the bottle. "It desolates me, *Señor Gringo,* that you must die too. I will not sleep well for thinking of it."

Mike grinned coldly. "You almost had me fooled then—but not quite. I thought you had something like this on your mind. So you're going to have me marched over there in the brush and made buzzard bait, too?"

"My young friend, you will never feel it," Sarrero assured him generously. "I have killed many men. It is over in a breath. I call the good God to witness."

More than half of the men had gone off with the firing squad. They were still in the brush. The other men had returned to their food, taking the whole thing as a matter of course. The saddle horses were still standing near.

"Call someone to witness this!" Mike snarled, and jammed his bound wrists forward.

CHAPTER SIX

The Road to Freedom!

SARRERO was not looking for anything like that from such a helpless prisoner. The cupped hands caught him under the chin with the full weight of Mike's powerful body behind them.

Sarrero's head snapped back at an angle. He flopped over to the ground with only a startled gasp issuing from his lips.

Mike bolted past him toward the saddled horses.

Gregorio's big bay horse was nearest. Startled, it turned away. Lunging forward, Mike got the saddle horn between his palms, and clung on as the horse reared. The men about the fire were on their feet shouting when Mike vaulted for the saddle.

The bolting horse snapped him hard into the leather. He hung onto the saddle horn and kicked his feet into the stirrups as the bay roared past the long string of picketed horses. Gun-shots blasted behind him. He set his feet firmly in the stirrups, swung forward, grabbed one rein, brought it back to his teeth, and did the same on the other side and got the second rein.

He almost went out of the saddle when the bolting horse plunged down into the bed of the little stream and raced up the opposite bank.

Bullets were whistling close as Mike spurred hard and crouched low. A glance over his shoulder showed the firing party running from the brush. The men at the cook fire were scattering out and shooting with rifles and revolvers.

That picket line of horses had been a God-send. They had served as a shield for the first few moments. Now the excited Mexicans were firing wildly at a phantom target fleeing at an angle away from them.

The little valley was not wide; the nearest brush was not far away. Mike set his teeth, fought down a desire to duck and dodge from the whiplash whine of bullets, and spurred the big bay into a frenzied gallop.

Something struck his hip. A numb feeling spread from the spot. Looking down, Mike saw where a bullet had sliced through the leather of his trousers and gouged deeply into the muscles of his leg. Blood was already welling up into sight.

But that was a small matter; that was only a hole in his leg; no worse than the whip weals across his face. The brush came nearer—nearer. The bullets were not so frequent. Looking back again, Mike saw several men riding after him. But most of the horses back there had been unsaddled, and Sarrero's men did not seem to have much taste for riding bareback with hackamores.

The bay plunged into the first brush and took the rise of the slope as if his bunching muscles were catapaults hurling him up the mountain.

Crouching low, Mike burred to the saddle while branches whipped and slashed at his head and body. He had no hat, no chaps or gloves; but the roughing he was taking now was nothing to what he rode away from.

The bay was a fine horse. The morning's ride seemed not to have tired it, by the way it fought up the mountain ridge; higher, higher—until the brush thinned to cleaner tree growth, and pines began to space about. They reached a mountain meadow on the high slope, and another slope beyond pitched down into a small rocky canyon.

Across the meadow Mike pulled up, looked back, listened while the bay caught its wind through flaring nostrils.

It seemed to him he heard far back the sounds of men shouting and branches snapping. But perhaps he was mistaken. A wind was soughing in the pines nearby. With that wind Mike sent the bay fleeing down into the canyon.

HE HAD to ride carefully the last few hundred feet, where bare rock sloped steeply, and sheer rock had to be skirted. In the canyon bottom there was no sun, so high and steep were the sides. And another little thread of water brawled easily into the north along the rock-studded canyon floor.

This time, as Mike paused briefly, he heard men and horses far up above. But they were high up; they could not see down into the canyon yet. Mike turned the bay north with the current of water.

North lay the rutted road and mountain passes toward San Saba and the Rio Grande. North too, with the water, the canyon would not pinch in unexpectedly and trap him.

Blood was soaking his leg now. Pain from the wound was stabbing, twitching nerves and muscles. But that was only pain, and the blood was not too much, and he could still ride strongly.

Mike grinned, drew a deep breath, and shouted with the relief of it. Don Mike O'Grady, fire and steel, young and hanging hard to life, he laughed; and the faint echo came back to him above the clashing of the bay's shod hoofs against the canyon rocks, and he rode north quite cheerfully although he was being doggedly followed.

With that rock treasure chamber at the del Grazar ranch already within his grasp, Juan Sarrero would move heaven and earth to get the one man who might carry warning ahead of him.

Mike looked down at his wrists. They

were chafed raw beneath the tight riata strands. He had no way to free them now. Gregorio had taken his gun, knife, rifle. Gregorio had thought of everything—but the workings of Juan Sarrero's mind.

All hatred for Gregorio was passing now. It was hard to believe Gregorio was still not somewhere in the background nursing his gringo hate, so casually had it happened. A short limping walk—a few shots—and the man was gone. And what a twist of irony it was that after a lifetime of gringo hate, the bullets that had killed Gregorio had not been fired by a gringo.

No, there was no hate for Gregorio now. Hate had killed him. And though Mike laughed at the relief of being alive, something had happened inside. Perhaps Maria Guadalupe Sedillo had been right, he considered. Perhaps two hundred years on the land they had won by sheer courage and daring did give these sons of the Dons the right to resent newcomers whose ways were not their ways, and who had wanted by any means the things they had.

All the del Grazars could not be like Gregorio, or the old and bitter Don Antonio. Antonita del Grazar had not been. Understanding began to come to Mike as he rode for his life down that rocky, winding canyon.

Gradually the canyon widened out and began to swing to the west. The rocky sides grew less steep. The going became better. Presently there was a steep terrace of rock leading up to brush and earth slopes above.

He put the bay to the rocks, giving it its head; and the horse made it without slipping and pushed into the brush, and kept on up. In a little while, some hundreds of feet up, Mike sat motionless in the saddle and heard shod hoofs passing over the canyon stones far below; passing—and galloping on.

He grinned again, and turned the bay's head on up the mountain, and rode leisurely, resting the horse.

Three hours later Mike knelt beside a third little trickle of water miles away and soaked his wrists patiently. Gradually the rawhide began to stretch.

Then, with both arms through the crudely knotted reins, to hold the horse, he looked for a sharp rock edge, and squatted and patiently sawed the stretched rawhide back and forth on the rock. He was perspiring when the last strand parted.

The saddlebags were still on the horse. He found them heavy with gold coins. Old coins for the most part—that might have rested for generations in the darkness of a rock cellar. There was also a box of cartridges for the rifle, and a small package of jerky. Mike gnawed the sun-dried meat, and rolled a cigarette and felt like a new man.

The bay was tiring. A lesser horse would have been dead-beat long before from those grueling slopes. But there was more ground to be covered yet. Mike limped over, climbed painfully into the saddle and rode on, bearing north.

DARKNESS found him still riding. The distant howl of a wolf was echoing from the sky when the moon came up. Still Mike rode on into the north. And suddenly he was at the twin ruts of the road, far east of Ojo Grande, and the way lay open to San Saba.

It was mid-morning when he reached the five Mexican huts where he had slept on the way west. The people greeted him without animosity. Gregorio had evidently not imparted to them his suspicions of the lone rider ahead of his party.

There Mike ate, got a package of food, fed his horse, and bought with gold a second horse, the best they had. No strangers had come along this road from the west yet. Mike headed east again.

Through the day he rode hard, changing horses every few hours, eating in the saddle. Well after dark, in the moonlight, he staked the tired horses out with ropes he had also bought from the Mexicans, and slept again for five or six hours on the ground.

Before starting in the morning, he drew his belt in two extra notches. He was losing weight fast. The sleep had not rested him. His eyes felt bloodshot and heavy in his dust-caked face. The horses were stiff and reluctant to start in the before-dawn chill. His wounded leg was stiff, too, and feverish.

But he was on his way again, back past the pine forests, the long open stretches of grass, with the mountains high to the south and dropping away into the north in wooded ridges. He passed two wagons, driven by Mexicans, and warned them that Sarrero, the bandit, was to the west, and rode on, slowing a little. The land was starting the long slope to the distant Rio Grande, and there would be a canyon several hours ahead marked by a bald-topped mesa where he would turn north to the TVO, the nearest ranch.

The road was clear behind; Mike had no warning of trouble when a burst of gunfire came from a clump of trees a hundred yards or so off to the left of the road. Mike heard the sodden slap of a bullet striking flesh. The horse he had bought from the sheepherders reared, tried to run, and pitched down on its knees.

CHAPTER SEVEN

No Help for Greasers

TURNING back, Mike grabbed for the rifle, and just got it out as the horse rolled over on the scabbard. He had let go of the lead rope. The bay horse had run off a few yards with the rope trailing, and now stood uncertainly as three riders burst out of the trees and galloped toward him, firing as they came.

The high-crowned hats, narrow trousers, bandoliers slung from shoulders stopped Mike from trying to catch the nervous bay. These men of Sarrero's must have ridden night and day to ambush the one man who carried warning of their presence toward the Rio Grande.

The dying horse was the only cover available. In a few moments it would be no cover at all. Mike stood in the open, exposed, and sighted his rifle at the first rider. He was deliberate about it, careful, very careful, for he dared not miss. Then he gently squeezed the trigger.

The man wilted, drooped in the saddle, toppled over and plunged to the ground.

The two men opened fire with their revolvers. They had spread out, and were coming in from two angles at full gallop.

Mike was calmer than he would have thought possible. He had to be cool as he squeezed the trigger again. This time the bandit reeled and caught at the saddle horn.

Consternation showed on the dark face of the third man. He yanked his horse at a tangent to the road, and slipped over, Indian style, half concealed behind the horse. His intent seemed to be a widening gallop about the spot, shooting over his horse.

MIKE got him with the next shot. Down on the horse's neck, hanging on with both arms, the Mexican barely made the shelter of the trees, and vanished.

Trembling, the bay horse had stood through it all. Nervously it backed away as Mike limped toward it, speaking soothingly. He managed to get the trailing rope, and led the bay back and set about getting the saddle off the dead horse.

He accomplished that after unbuckling one of the stirrups.

Mike pushed on hurriedly. Sarrero and his men could not be far behind now. Before many hours they would be at the Circle Half Moon.

The steady pound of the bay's shod hoofs echoed back from the bald-topped mesa as Mike turned north toward the TVO. San Saba was on into the east, where the land, now growing arid and brown, dropped down to the dry stretches by the Rio Grande.

But San Saba was still distant. Any help there might be slow, long-delayed. Juan Sarrero would not waste any time. Dave Schaal and his TVO men were the only certain help.

So Mike drove the flagging bay unmercifully through the late afternoon. Nostrils flaring, alkali dust coating its sweating sides, the bay responded gamely.

The sun was still well above the horizon when he came through broken country to a little valley opening into the east, and found at its head the windmills, corrals and adobe buildings of Schaal's TVO ranch. The bay was staggering from exhaustion when it reached the corrals where two hands were saddling a horse.

"Where's Schaal?" Mike called to them.

One of the men was the raw-boned Blondy whose knuckles Mike had slashed. A dirty bandage was still around the hand as Blondy jerked a thumb toward the house and growled, "Schaal's in there. What the hell do *you* want here?"

Mike rode around to the front of the house without answering. He was limping to the front door when it opened and Miss Hartman stepped out.

She looked at his gaunt, haggard face, cut with the raw whip furrows, and at his blood-caked leg, and spoke with swift concern.

"Schaal's in the house. I'll get him. No—come in yourself."

But as she turned back to the door Dave Schaal came out. His stabbing gaze under bushy black brows showed no surprise. "What happened?" he asked impassively.

"Plenty," Mike said. "Sarrero and his men are riding this way."

"How many men?" he asked.

"About seventeen or eighteen. I killed one, and wounded a couple more."

A flicker of admiration showed in Schaal's eyes. "Have to fight the whole bunch?" he asked.

"Only the three. They followed me, and jumped me about noon today. Gregorio del Grazar rode over to Ojo Grande to meet Sarrero. Gregorio was planning to have you and your neighbors cleaned."

Schaal scowled. "I see where we're going to have to clean out that whole Mex tribe before we get along here," he growled.

Mike was rolling a cigarette. He was so tired his hands shook.

"Gregorio is dead," he said. "Sarrero killed him and the four men with him. Sarrero decided to pass you folks up and raid the del Grazar place. He's heard they've got plenty of wealth hidden."

Dave Schaal laughed then, loudly, harshly—as Mike had laughed at Gregorio.

"I don't know how you found all that out," Schaal gasped. "But it's the funniest thing I've heard since I left Texas. He hired Sarrero to raid us, did he, and Sarrero up and killed him, and is going to raid his place instead? I never heard the beat of it!"

Even Miss Hartman was smiling, uncertainly.

"There aren't any Americans at the del Grazar place," Mike said. "Their Mexicans won't put up much of a fight. Sarrero would skin his brother alive if he thought it would pay him to do it. He'll do worse to the del Grazars. And—women are there, and probably kids, who won't have a chance."

Schaal had stopped chuckling. He was smiling grimly. Miss Hartman's face had sobered.

"What's all that to us?" Schaal asked. "Anything that happens to them now is on their own heads, isn't it?"

"No," said Mike. "Not those women and children. They didn't have anything to do with this."

"He's right, Dave," Miss Hartman said.

Schaal went impassive and stolid. "Why tell me about it?" he asked Mike.

"You and your men and your neighbors are the nearest to them. You're the only ones who can help them."

Schaal shook his head. "No," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Son of Perfidy

MIKE stared haggardly at the man. "Don't you understand what's going to happen?" he burst out. "I got away from Sarrero—and he sent men after me. He couldn't have been far behind them."

"Dave, you've got to help them," Miss Hartman said.

Schaal's face was flushing with gathering anger. "I won't meddle in this," he said harshly. "You know what all has happened, Miss Hartman. I'll tell *you*, O'Grady. Four days ago a bunch of cows I was bringing over from the Pecos were jumped east of the Rio Grande at a dry bed ground. They were stampeded back into the dry country they had just come over—and we won't get a lot of them out alive. Two of my men were shot up at the same time, too. That was del Grazar work. Last week we found one of my line riders out to the west of here shot through the back and dead almost ten days. That was more del Grazar work, although we can't prove it. Burro Mesa spring, the only water in twelve miles over that way, was poisoned—and we lost almost two hundred head before we found it out. More del Grazar work.

"I've been in range wars before where it was give and take, and hell waitin' for the slow man," Schaal said violently. "But I never seen such a bundle of dirty tricks used before. I've almost got to the point of shooting the whole damn del Grazar tribe out of the country anyway. If this Mex bandit is going to do it for me, I wish him luck. Their women and kids aren't any of my concern. I'm trying to build up a ranch here."

"Maybe," Mike said tonelessly, "the del Grazars have their side of it, too, trying to hold the land they've always had."

Schaal shrugged contemptuously. "If they can't hold it fair, that's their hard luck."

"Dave," Miss Hartman said, greatly troubled, "I think you're wrong. We've got to do something."

"Now, miss, you keep out of this," Schaal told her with growing irritation. "Your father pays me to handle this ranch like I see fit. I know what I'm doing now. I'd be a fool to take men off our land, when we may need 'em before this Sarrero gets out of the county. No telling but what he'll change his mind and head for us after all."

"He won't," Mike said. "He's after that cache of silver and gold under their house."

"I've said my say," Schaal stated heavily.

MIKE dropped the unlighted cigarette and touched the red whip weals on his face. "Gregorio del Grazar did this with his quirt," he said tonelessly. "He tied me up and told Sarrero to kill me. I got a bullet through my leg getting away. That was a lot to take from the del Grazars. A damned sight more than you'll ever have to take yourself. And yet I

mighty near killed that horse and myself getting here to help them. Two wrongs don't make a right. There's a sweet, pretty girl at that house who ain't even a del Grazar. No finer woman ever lived than my mother, and she was a del Grazar. There may be more like her there. If you wipe your hands of it this way, Schaal, I wipe my hands of you. You ain't the white man I thought you were. There isn't time for me to ride into San Saba and ask for help. I'm heading on to the Circle Half Moon to do what I can. I'll thank you for a fresh horse, and if there's any white man in you at all, you'll start someone to San Saba with the news."

Schaal's face crimsoned.

"You take a horse and get the hell out of here!" he flared. "I've had my say and I know what I'm doing!"

Pale, determined, Miss Hartman burst out, "Dave, you're terribly wrong—the first time I've ever heard of your being so. You're too bitter over all that's happened lately. If you won't go, *I'll* go!"

"You won't leave the place!" Schaal snapped. "I'm responsible for you."

Mike was already limping out to the horse. They could do their arguing alone. Time was flying. He had a long way to go yet. They were still talking when he galloped back to the corrals.

"Schaal says to give me a fresh horse," he told the two men. "I'm riding on."

Blondy cursed under his breath and stalked away while his short, bow-legged companion entered the next corral, roped a horse, and help Mike transfer the heavy silver-studded saddle.

"Fancy leather you got," the shorter man commented enviously.

"It ain't mine."

"You've got damn good friends then, mister. None of my friends would lend a tricky saddle like this."

Mike smiled grimly. "The owner went on a trip and he won't be back for a long time. What's the best way to get to the Circle Half Moon?"

"Hell! You ridin' to the del Grazars?"

"Yes."

"Watch yourself. They're snakes. You head northwest. . . ."

DAVE SHAAL and Miss Hartman had not appeared when Mike climbed stiffly into the saddle again and headed toward the distant butte which marked the way to the Circle Half Moon. The sun was setting. He had long miles to cover—and with him he took the knowledge that even now he might be too late.

The sun vanished, darkness closed down; he rode by the stars, cutting across the open country toward the Cañon del Muerto—the canyon of death. Dave Schaal had said in San Saba that the canyon had been named because long ago a war party of Indians had been trapped in it and slaughtered.

Mike reached it, after crossing a long flat mesa; there suddenly before him in the pale starlight was the deep, shadow-filled gash, silent, yawning in the night. Its volcanic rock sides were steep, treacherous. But there was a way down, and up the other side. And then, a little farther to the north and he was at the headquarters of all the del Grazars.

In the moonlight the big house, the corrals and the outbuildings perched on high, flat ground above the canyon like the sprawling nest of an eagle. A rock cliff rose stark and dark behind, and the canyon bounded on the east. Only to the south and west was the country level.

A hundred times Antonita del Grazar had talked to him of this spot. It was even more impressive now under the pale, cold moon. No boiling town plaza, no pushing gringos were here to dim the record of two centuries. Close as the world and its new ways had pushed, not yet had it

reached here, nor did it seem tonight as if it ever would.

Dogs rushed out barking as Mike rode past corrals where horses stamped and nickered, past small adobe houses where doors opened on dimly-lighted interiors and men and women peered out to see who came.

He had been right. Women and children were in these little huts clustering close around the foot of the big house.

And the big house itself was built back against the cliff, a mansion of many rooms, and wings and patios; two stories high against the cliff in the central part, old and massive like a fort, built of lava rock, adobe and logs.

When Santa Fé, in the north, had been the only capital in a million square miles of wilderness, the del Grazars had faced the frontier from this spot, with their back against that rocky cliff and their eyes looking out over their empire.

But tonight as servants came out with lanterns to take the horse, only a few lighted windows showed against the night, and inside an old man nursed a futile, helpless bitterness.

STIFFLY Mike got down and tossed the reins to a peering figure with a lantern. "I will see Don Antonio," he said in Spanish.

"He is in the house, señor. If you will knock on the door . . . "

Mike used the heavy, hand-wrought iron doorknocker on a solid wooden door, and the door was opened by a meek-faced woman servant whose eyes grew wide at the tall, haggard figure she saw.

"Tell Don Antonio that Mike O'Grady is here with news of importance," Mike said in Spanish; and as the woman hesitated, Mike stepped into the low, long dimly lighted hall.

With an uneasy look at him the woman left him there. People were in the house; he could hear them talking in some distant room. A woman laughed, and fingers struck a few chords from a guitar. And then through the doorway where the woman servant had vanished, Marie Guadalupe Sedillo slipped into the hall.

"I thought from what Trinidad said that it was you," she said hurriedly. "Why did you come here? Your face—what has happened?"

"I met Gregorio," Mike told her stolidly. But he wasn't stolid inside. Tonight she wore black that billowed out from her slender waist and made her troubled face by contrast pale and delicate.

Startled, she said, "Gregorio?" And looked at the marks on his face again, and turned one small hand palm up in a gesture of helplessness. "I was afraid it would happen," she said miserably.

"It doesn't matter now," Mike told her. "You're not angry with me?"

"Angry? For why—" She saw his faint smile. Color crept into her cheeks. "Your manners at times, Señor Gringo," she said severely, "are not of the best." And then she was troubled again. "Did you come here to fight Don Antonio? He is old, and my god-father. I don't want that."

"I came here to help him, ma'am."

"He will be here. Come with me."

The room into which she took him was big, high-ceilinged, lighted by several lamps. Bear skins and buffalo rugs were on the floor, hand-carved wooden *santos* stood in little niches in the wall, and the corners held decorated pottery of Indian make. It was an old, gracious room, much lived in, mellowed by the ghosts of the past. But the tall, gaunt figure which entered brought a chill into the mellowness.

"You again," Don Antonio said coldly. "What now do you want?"

Mike touched his cheek. "I met Gregorio," he said. "You'd better know it first."

The thin, bloodless lips did not move. Sunken eyes stared at the whip marks.

"If Gregorio did that on his way to El Paso, the trip was worth while," Don Antonio said bleakly.

"He didn't go to El Paso.."

"Eh? Where is Gregorio then?"

"He's dead," Mike said.

MARIA SEDILLO uttered the exclamation of distress. Don Antonio stood there as if he did not comprehend, but his face seemed to grow thinner, and his erect shoulders drooped a little. And at that moment the slim young man who had ridden up with Gregorio in San Saba hurried into the room. His face was disturbed. He spoke in Spanish, but Mike understood.

"This man rode in on Gregorio's saddle. Your men recognized it."

"Then," said Don Antonio with a sudden fierce bitterness that shook his whole frame, "I will kill this gringo myself! Get my gun!"

"Listen, you fool!" Mike flung at him harshly. "I didn't kill your son, although I should have! He caught me in Ojo Grande, where he went to meet Juan Sarrero. You with your damned pride, lying to me about El Paso, while you're thinking Sarrero is going to raid your neighbors! You're as bad as your Gregorio, poisoning waterholes, shooting your neighbor's men in the backs, stampeding their cattle, skulking to have them killed off by a dirty bandit from south of the Border. It wasn't because of *you* I came here. It was the women and kids. Your damned Gregorio was killed by Sarrero because Sarrero has decided it's easier to raid you and get at the rock cellar under the house here. I've damn near killed myself to get here and warn you. Now the rest is up to you. Schaal, at the TVO, won't help you, after all he's suffered from your dirty tricks. The nearest help is San Saba. You'd better get ready for trouble. Sarrero may be here any minute. And when he comes it won't be your old bones that will suffer. It'll be the people around the place like Maria Guadalupe here."

No one noticed that he had used her first name. Don Antonio had shrunk a little before that torrent of words, had withered before the blast. Fear that was not physical fear came into his face.

"I don't know these things of which you speak," he said. "I have had nothing to do with a bandit. I have poisoned no waterholes or had men shot in the back."

"Then who's been giving orders around here?" Mike snapped.

Old bony hands spread helplessly. The old man looked at the younger man. "José" he said, "what of this?"

And the younger man looked uncomfortable. "Don Antonio, I am only a friend of the family. Not even as close as my sister here."

"It is so then?"

"It was not up to me to talk to you of Gregorio's doing, señor."

"There should have been no tales about my son to bring," Don Antonio muttered. He stood a moment in silence with his chin down, aloof from them, far away; and then his shoulders straightened and he lifted his head, and his voice was calm. "When are these bandits coming?" he asked Mike.

"They weren't far behind me. You won't have time to send for help."

"Will you be going now, Señor O'Grady?"

Here was pride to the last, refusing to ask for help after what had passed between them.

"I'm staying," Mike said. "And I'll need more than the rifle I brought."

"We have guns," Don Antonio told him—and before Mike's eyes the gaunt, tired old man dropped off the weary years, and became young again as he turned to the door shouting orders, sending the slim young man running, and Maria Sedillo

slipping hurriedly out of the room to the women.

Before leaving the room himself, Don Antonio spoke swiftly to Mike, with a hard, grim ring in his voice.

"Better men than miserable Mexican bandits have come for the gold under this house. We will see."

Mike could only nod. He was beginning to see why del Grazars had held this place for two centuries.

CHAPTER NINE

Gringo Savior

THE house was in an uproar, outside and in. Poorly dressed women and children were crowding in from the small houses outside, scurrying to the back rooms. Chests holding rifles, revolvers and belts of cartridges were carried into the big front room to be distributed among the men.

Of the del Grazar family and friends, there were only three men Mike had not seen before, and two of them were old, like Don Antonio. But those old men were calm as they took up weapons.

Women, too, came for guns, Maria Sedillo among them; and Mike thought it strange to see her small hands holding a rifle. She smiled wanly at him and vanished to the back of the house.

Don Antonio issued sharp orders—two men up on the flat roof, others at the upper windows, two at the front door. The rest —with Don Antonio and Mike outside.

And when they were out, the massive front door was barred against them, and there were no lights in the front of the house, and the big building loomed darkly there against the cliff like a fort.

Mike had heard orders given to empty the corrals. There would be no horses to run away—or none to escape on. And out in the moonlight, among the little adobe huts, with the canyon protecting them on the east, and the rock behind, they waited for what might come out of the night from the south and west.

An hour—two hours they waited, with Don Antonio moving from man to man to see that all was ready. They were not many, twelve men, and some of the ranch hands looked pretty poor to Mike. Not much to guard a rock cellar filled with gold and silver and a house full of women and children. They were waiting for men who lived by fighting and loot. But perhaps a miracle would happen and they would not come.

Mike saw a crouching shadow coming past the corrals a moment later—and then another, and another—men on foot coming up to the house. He sighted at the nearest one and fired.

Then they knew Sarrero and his men were there, for the night erupted gun fire in front of them, and a yelling line of crouching, dodging men swept in toward the first buildings.

If it had been daylight they might have had a chance; but moonlight and shadows were mixed, men were hard to see.

That first rush brought Sarrero's men to the outer huts where they had shelter.

Mike saw one man drop, thought he hit another. Toward the house a man cried out. From the corner of his eye Mike saw another stagger out into the moonlight and fall.

From the doorway of one hut Mike fired at the corner of another hut fifty yards away where a gun had flashed. And didn't hit the man, for the gun flashed again and a bullet smashed into the door frame at his shoulder. This was better shooting than Sarrero's men had done in the daytime; but they were closer now, and not surprised. But if they got between the house and these outer huts, they would have little more trouble. Already the gun fire of Don Antonio's men

was slackening off, as if several of the hands had run away or been shot.

Then Don Antonio shouted for them all to get back into the house. A flicker of fire came from the spot where he called. As Mike ran toward the house he saw the tall old figure trotting also. Flame was visible in the hut that Don Antonio had just quitted.

THE front door opened to receive them. Mike stood outside the doorway and shot at the gun flashes of Sarrero's men who were following them.

"Get in!" Don Antonio ordered Mike harshly, and followed him in, the last one.

And as the door was slammed and barred, bullets thudded against the thick wood. But none got through, so thick was the door.

Don Antonio's orders sent men to guard the windows. Someone was groaning. A lamp was lighted in the hall. One of the *peons* lay on the floor holding his stomach and rolling his eyes as he groaned.

Blood was dripping off Don Antonio's wrist.

"How bad is it?" Mike asked.

"It is nothing," he was told. "Will you watch the door, señor? I can trust you. The windows are high and small. I think they will try to break in a door. We will have light out there quickly," Don Antonio said grimly, and trotted out of the hall, calling orders.

Three of the native women ran into the hall and dragged out the wounded man. Mike found himself alone with one of the poorly dressed servants.

"Mother of Mercy, if the other men were only here!" the man stammered. "They are out on the range. They will not be back for days. And our throats will be cut by then!"

"Shut up!" Mike said savagely.

The next instant the massive door shivered as a heavy weight crashed against it. Bits of the adobe wall fell to the floor. Again and again the door was struck. Mike guessed that a long, heavy corral pole was being rammed against it. Overhead on the roof he could hear guns crashing. Outside men were shooting rapidly and shouting threats.

And then the fastenings which held the bar at one end pulled out. Mike skidded a chair behind it and smashed the lamp chimney against the wall with a gun barrel as the door flew open and the end of a long, heavy pole rammed in against the wall. A wave of yelling men charged the doorway.

Mike's blazing guns met them. He could see them, for the hut Don Antonio had fired was burning inside, throwing lurid light out into the night.

The first man pitched through the doorway as Mike's roaring guns cut him down. Mike was conscious that his companion had vanished. He didn't have time to think of that. Too many men were outside trying to get in. Too many guns were throwing lead through the partially opened door.

He stood in the shelter of the door as best he could and dropped another man, and a third. A bullet clipped his hair, another his wrist. Hands were shoving guns around the edge of the door and firing blindly into the hall.

Mike cursed the men who had run. When his guns were empty he'd have no time to reload. Then his right hand and forearm went numb as a bullet knocked the revolver out of it.

From the next room one of Don Antonio's elderly guests ran into the hall; and a bullet hit him and he sprawled across the floor. Mike's last revolver snapped uselessly. He smashed the empty gun at the first head which appeared inside the doorway. The man dropped. Hands outside dragged him out before Mike could get his gun

Swearing, Mike jumped back and groped on the floor for the gun the wounded man had dropped. But the hall was dark. He couldn't find it.

This was the end, Mike knew. They'd be inside in a minute, if they hadn't forced some other entrance. If only he had a gun. What could a few peons and old men do against a bunch of gold-starved outlaws anyway? Why didn't they come in that open doorway?

HIS ringing ears suddenly picked out a new burst of yells outside. The night seemed full of shots now. And the doorway was empty, deserted.

Mike found the gun he was groping for and ran back to the doorway, and then stepped outside, for there was no one at the door. The shooting was back among the huts now, retreating fast. Mike ran that way.

A quarter of an hour later he came back with Dave Schaal and some of the TVO men. The rest were scattered out looking for bandits that were afoot.

"We heard the shooting when we came up out of the canyon, and rode like hell," Schaal explained. "Found their horses back a little and scattered 'em. They won't get far afoot. We'll pick 'em up in the morning. Did they get into the house? Hurt any—uh—kids?"

"I don't think so," Mike said.

Schaal said nothing. Just ahead of them the roof of the burning hut fell in. Sparks and flames shot up. But all the other roofs were of dirt, so it did not matter much. Men had run out of the house and were watching. Don Antonio was out there, holding a bloody cloth about his wrist and giving orders. He walked to meet Mike and Dave Schaal. His English was stilted, formal.

"So it was your help that saved us, Señor Schaal? I am in your debt."

"Never mind," Dave Schaal said impassively. "I got to thinking about your womenfolks and kids. Miss Hartman was anxious, too."

An uncomfortable silence followed.

"Hell!" Mike said disgustedly. "I've told Schaal you didn't know about a lot of things that have happened, Don Antonio. Maybe he won't admit it, but I reckon he understands."

Don Antonio cleared his throat. "After tonight, Señor Schaal, I don't think there is anything we can't settle by talking."

It was still there, that pride which would not unbend and ask for what an old man's gaunt face was pleading. Dave Schaal was man enough to see it.

"Hell, yes," he said. "I guess we can talk things over—neighbor. O'Grady here has sort of made me see things different."

Don Antonio took the hand Dave Schaal extended. He was gaunt and old, but his thin face was softer and his voice no longer bitter as he smiled.

"We are proud of my sister's son, my friend," he said. "I hope he will stay with us. I am not too old not to—to need another son."

It was Don Mike O'Grady then, as quick to tears as to laughter or anger, who looked into the gaunt old face and grinned, and blew his nose on his bandanna.

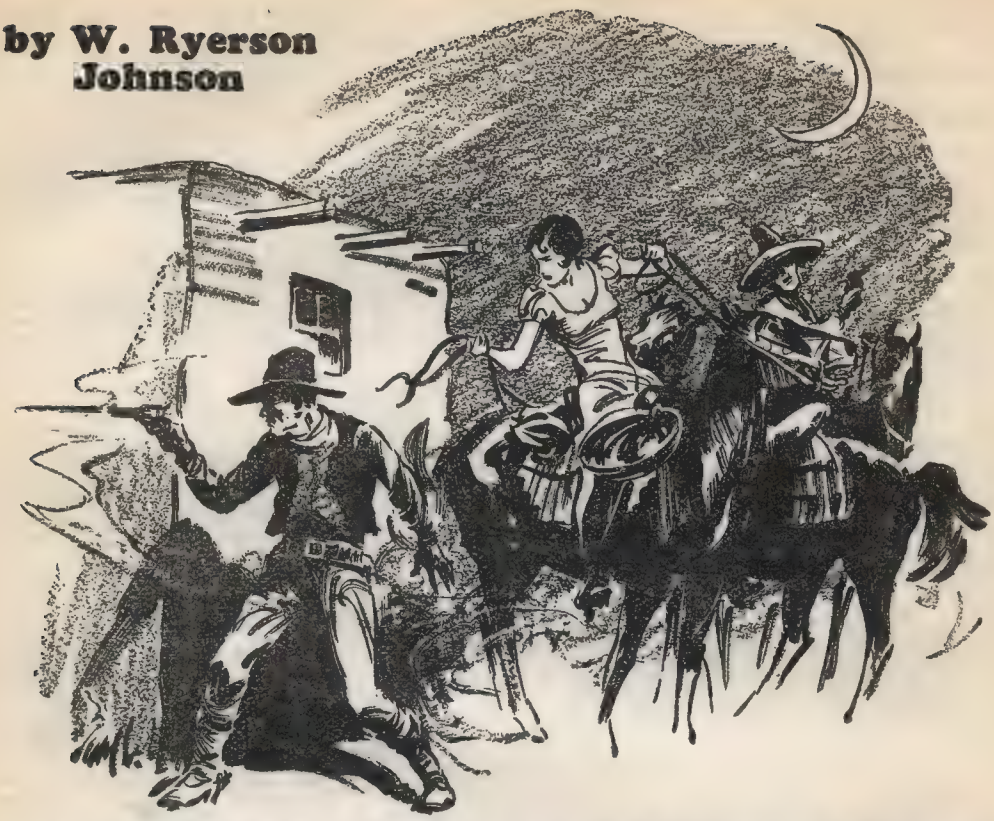
"Thank you, sir," he said. "While you two talk around here I'll go into the house. I've got business in there."

And it was Don Antonio del Grazar, wise from a long lifetime, who chuckled and said, "I think Maria Guadalupe is upstairs."

But Mike was already hurrying toward the house.

THE END

by W. Ryerson Johnson



GUERRILLA RENDEZVOUS

Jeff Menard could take women or leave them alone—he could look through powdersmoke at the saltiest of gunslingers. But his kid brother, he said, who was missing below the Border, was not like that. Curley needed a nurse—and Jeff was it!

OLD Eagle-beak Jackson slapped his horse into the corral and stepped back, chewing fiercely on a blade of salt-grass.

"Three weeks now and nary hide nor hair of him."

Lank Jeff Menard nodded grimly. "Reckon I better take a sashay t'other side the line and snake him out."

"I reckon."

Jeff grinned feebly. "That kid brother of mine never could tell sheep-dip from payday 'lessen I was along to read him the writin'."

"Likely got hisself snubbed up by some of them Mexican wimen. Some hombres, wimen goes to their heads, like likker."

"Curley's thataway."

Neither the old rancher nor his top-hand were quite meeting the other's eye. And nobody was fooling anybody by this off-hand talk about women and liquor. If anything had happened to Curley, then El Tigre was responsible. They both knew that.

El Tigre operated a small—and fierce—guerrilla band the other side the border. Three weeks back the bandit had led his men in a foray across the line and driven off half a hundred of Eagle-beak Jackson's beefs. Incidental to the run-off they had killed one of the rancher's riders—

and lopped off his ears, grouped out his eyes, and cut off his tongue as a warning of what could be expected by anybody who came investigating.

Curley Menard, Jeff's kid brother with the sunny face and dynamite nature, had insisted on being the one to go prowling. That was three weeks ago.

"Now me," Jeff resumed, "I can take my wimen or leave 'em alone."

On the hoof-packed dirt behind them a light footstep sounded, an airy laugh. "Says you, big boy!"

Jeff turned, grinned slowly. "Hello, Judy."

The girl, slim and lovely in fresh morning gingham, darted inquiring glances at the two men. "Am I interrupting something? I wanted to tell you, Jeff, there's a dance tonight at—"

"Jeff's goin' on a trip," Eagle-beak cut in gruffly.

"Oh! Not—not down below?" When they hesitated, she burst out: "Dad, is that where Curley went? Is it? It is, I know! And he hasn't come back! And now you, Jeff! Oh, you can't . . . !"

Jeff fidgeted and looked away over the yucca-studded roll of hills. Eagle-beak's daughter was always worrying about him. She was a nice enough girl and all that, and he liked her, but so did he like a lot of other girls. The fact that Judy was the prettiest blonde in half of Arizona didn't help matters either, because Jeff inclined to brunettes.

Judy looked from one to another, blue eyes wide with anxiety. "And all this talk about women—what was that?"

Old Eagle-beak chewed more fiercely on his piece of salt-grass. "Why, uh—Jeff allows Curley's been detained on account not knowin' proper how to defend hisself agin' some of El Tigre's wimen."

"Oh, and Jeff would know all about that!"

"Sure, Jeff knows wimen."

She tossed her head. "Jeff doesn't know enough about women to—to kiss one of them in the dark!" Then she had turned on her tiny heels and started swiftly toward the house.

Old Eagle-beak shook his head and grinned.

"She'll marry you yet, boy," he said.

ON a rutted trail that runs south over the gravel hills from Nogales, the Inn of Spiders, as sinister a rendevous as any in Mexico, squatted like a noxious mushroom growth, its adobe bulk polluting the wind-swept hills with its miasma of sensual music, marihuana stench, cruel laughter.

The Inn of Spiders was a place of death. Few came here except those callous ones who dealt in death, or those tired ones who did not care, or those few innocent ones who did not know.

It was whispered that the lone American who sat night after night in the den of death, flinging his chips on the roulette layout, cuddling always in his left hand an earthen mug of fiery *mescal,* was one of those tired ones who did not care.

But Dolores, whose lips were red and whose body was a soft caress upon this monstrous blight, this Inn of Spiders—Dolores who danced all night and sang Mexican love songs in a husky-sweet voice, thought differently about the gringo stranger. She saw how lank he was, and firm and brown. She noted the strong lines of his chin beneath its growth of stubble. And she had seen his eyes when the *mescal* fog was not upon them, flash clear and blue.

It was the belief of Dolores that he was one of the innocent ones who did not know. She tried her best to warn him as he hunched at the roulette table, eyes slitted against the reek of corn-husk cigarettes. So close she bent that the warm breath of her body mingled with

his own, and her heartbeat was in his ears. She took a red rose out of her hair, smoothed its velvety petals over his hand.

In a whispering rush her words came: "When the music starts, *señor,* come to me and ask me to dance. Something I have to tell you which concerns your very life."

Then she smiled and drifted away through the blue smoke haze, her high heels scuffing the thin wash of sawdust on the puncheon floor—that sawdust which was gray from the grind of many boots; and black, some of it, from spilled blood.

The croupier was a sinuous Spaniard with the oddly fixed eyes of a coral snake. He wore sweat-soiled evening clothes; his starched shirtfront was a limp blot. Sweat stood in tiny globules on his face and trickled from slicked-back hair.

"Thirteen on the red," he rasped, and raked in the gringo's losings.

Two swarthy *mestizos* sat behind the croupier on a small platform. Neither gun nor knife showed anywhere upon them, but their sashes of sweaty red wool were lumped in places easy of access to their hands. Their bleak stare lay like a lethal weight upon the gringo at the roulette table.

THE music started throbbing out a native adaptation of the carioca, brought up from even hotter and more lawless lands south toward the Isthmus. Violins wailed, guitars caressed, pebble-loaded *calabazas* shook out rhythm, savage, lustful, seeping into the blood like drugged liquor.

The gringo pushed back from the roulette table. "Hold my place," he muttered thickly. *"Un momento."*

They watched him as he wove unsteadily toward the dance floor, bowed, and claimed Dolores for the dance. From everywhere in the *cantina* eyes gleamed, lips tightened, tongues jetted words.

"See, the gringo dances with El Tigre's own!"

"So!"

"His blood spilling—it will be good to watch!"

With Dolores' soft body welded to his in the dance, the gringo smiled down, asked in Spanish: "How in this place hotter than the bulls of hell do you keep so cool?"

"I drink no *mescal,* none," she answered. "And you, *señor,* if you value your life, should drink none also. *Cuidado, señor!* Take care! Tonight is the night they have chosen."

He laughed shortly. "So, they become impatient? They tire of cheating me a little every night. They would finish it up with a knife through the throat. Is that it?"

"Si, señor! But how do you know they have been cheating you?"

"They are clumsy, *'chacha."*

"If you know that, you are not so drunk as you appear. *Señor,* who are you?"

"My name would mean nothing to you."

"Why do you come here?"

"Perhaps to watch you dance."

"But you do not watch me dance! You look always at the roulette wheel—or at the door." Her voice grew tense. *"Señor,* you wait for someone, no?"

"Perhaps for you, Dolores. Shall we go to your room?"

He felt her body stiffen against him and pull away. She said coolly: "If that is why you are here, there are other girls for you. There is Helena, and Carmon, and Maria. . . . You may have any one of them. Me, I dance only, and sing."

He smiled. "I didn't mean that. I meant go to your room to talk. I have much to say to the woman of El Tigre."

She looked up at him, holding a secret dream in her eyes. "In all the world, *señor,* there is but one man who may come to my room."

"And that man—El Tigre?" he persisted.

Her bare arm which had rested so warmly around his neck as they danced, had slipped down along his back. All at once her fingers pressed exploringly at a flat bulge under his arm.

"Señor, a gun you carry!"

"A bottle of *tequila,"* he corrected.

But she knew that he lied. She looked at him searchingly, with a quick fear. She was aware now that she and everybody had been wrong in their estimate of this *americano.* He was not one of the tired ones who welcome death, nor was he one of those innocents, unaware of his peril here.

He belonged to that sinister third class. He had come to the Inn of Spiders to *make* death!

SHE had to leave the gringo then. The orchestra swung into *La Cucaracha,* and gently she disengaged herself and strutted in a comic dance, clicking heels and castanets, and singing a funny song about a lady cockroach who didn't want to travel because she had no marihuana cigarettes.

Dolores had to dance very furiously and sing very loudly the endless verses about the traveling cockroach, so that those leering lustful faces banked against the yellow lamplight would not guess the fear that had sprung to her heart.

When the song was over she started on a teasing trip between the tables, swaying bare shoulders; caressing with her eyes, her crooning lips; brushing a red nose provocatively over many sweat-greased faces.

And all the time she worked closer to the roulette table where the tall *americano* sat, cuddling his *mescal* and his colored chips, but in reality watching the door out of quartz-brittle eyes not at all *mescal* fogged—and watching her too now.

A *mestizo's* sticky hand clawed out, blotted up the rose. She laughed and took another from her dark hair, a bud as red and fresh as her lips, the petals a little relaxed, soft like her lips. She swayed away, crooning; her short skirts swished against the *gringo's* chair and the rose bud nodded its fragrance close to his face.

Leon Pasquele, the croupier with the eyes like a coral snake's, spoke to her harshly: "Dolores, *quita!"*

She went away, but she left the rose bud crushed in the tall *americano's* palm . . . and Jeff Menard kept on losing chips to the roulette wheel, while his hand out of sight below the table mangled the rose bud, extracting a tightly folded bit of paper from between the petals.

He started rolling a cigarette and it gave him a chance to conceal the flattened-out note in his palm as he read it. He got a lift out of the tiny-lettered scrawl. It said:

> When I begin my spider dance go to my room and wait for me.

Jeff carefully finished building his corn-husk cigarette and borrowed a match from the swart killer who sat next to him. No one could have guessed as the rank sweetish smoke ballooned in the air that a note from Dolores was going up in that smoke.

And Jeff Menard, on the prowl down here to locate his brother—or the killer of his brother—Jeff, who knew all about women, especially brunettes, felt a warm glow dispelling a little of the bleakness which encased him.

The whole thing maybe was a trap. He didn't overlook that. But when a woman has made a man's blood run like molten

fire through his veins, a possible trap baited with the woman, far from seeming sinister, is glamour tinged, a thing compelling investigation. The fact remained, Jeff told himself, she had asked him to her room.

And she had never admitted that her man was El Tigre—he caught at that. Perhaps she, too, sought the blood of this killer, and wanted an alliance with the American. It was something to think about anyhow.

So Jeff waited until dark screens were slipped over the yellow oil lamps to cause a spread of weird bluish light on the stage. The spider-web drop was lowered, and Dolores appeared in a diaphanous costume and went into her spider dance.

Jeff caught his breath at the girl's sheer sensuous appeal. And while she swayed with tigerish intensity, in her dance fighting the web that slowly enmeshed her soft body, he pushed back from the roulette table. He left a sizeable stack of chips behind to throw off any suspicion that he might be taking a run-out.

Through the darkened *cantina* he made his way, and into a narrow hall where the reeking smoke of black tobacco, corn husks, and marihuana was backed up like a smudge. Here were the rooms and over each door a girl's name. It was too dark to read the names, but he had spotted Dolores' room long before this. He paused before the stout oak door, pressed the latch. The door opened and he eased through, six-gun in hand, and closed the door behind him.

IT was cooler inside. A tallow flame burning in a goblet of red glass before a wooden crucifix, splashed pale illumination. The faint perfume odor of Dolores was in the air and it got to Jeff for a weakening instant almost the same as if the girl was in his arms.

It didn't unsteady his gun-hand though. His eyes lanced with cool alertness. Three seconds were enough to assure him he was alone in her tiny room. He couldn't help dreaming a little wild then. This must be on the level after all.

Then he saw something which jarred him. It was in a crinkle-glass soapdish there on her washstand. His nails grated on glass as he fingered up a half-dozen curved pointed objects. He carried them close to the flickering light. They were what he had guessed—claws which had once armored the pads of a Mexican puma.

This clinched one thing tight as a fence post sunk in *caliche*. The wagging tongues were right; Dolores *was* El Tigre's woman. The swaggering bandit had got his name from the fact that he wore on his steeple-crowned hat, not the customary dangling silver *conchos*, but a fringe made from puma claws. And here were claws. Dolores had been the one to fashion the claw hat-fringe for El Tigre! And these were a few which had been left over.

Jeff lit matches then and went on a grim search of the tiny room. Under the washstand, pushed far back to the wall, the yellow match glare revealed a pair of discarded dance pumps. Jeff sat on his heels and raked them out. He held them both with ease in his one big hand. Scuffed they were and high heels run over.

Looking at them, some more of the bleakness went out of his lean face. "Tired little shoes . . . *zapaticos*," he said, and the way he whispered it was a rough caress.

He tipped them up and something fell out of the toe of one, made metallic splash on the bare wood floor. He picked up what had fallen. It was an old copper U. S. two-cent piece plugged with a peculiar horseshoe design.

He held it so tightly that the veins rose in ridges on the back of his hand. And in his other hand the match burned down

and scorched his fingers and he never knew. He had recognized this plugged copper. It was his brother's lucky piece!

Here, in the possession of El Tigre's woman, Curley's lucky piece! That was a laugh—lucky piece! And where was Curley? Murdered by El Tigre and this souvenir flung to the bandit's woman?

That was the worst Jeff could think of. He cooled off, considered more optimistic angles. It was possible that he and Curley had come to the Inn of Spiders on the same hunch, both hoping to contact El Tigre when the bandit risked a visit here to be with his woman. Curley might have left the lucky piece with Dolores for a sign. And Dolores herself might be coming to this room with a message from Curley.

Straightening up after shoving the tired *zapaticos* back under the washstand, Jeff caught a dim glimpse of his face in Dolores' mirror. He stretched his neck, hand rubbing at his jaw. Hell, he wasn't a bad looking hombre, even with the two-weeks bush on his mug. Maybe now it was this way—maybe Dolores was all dusted off with El Tigre. Maybe she wanted a new man. Maybe she wanted Jeff Menard, and to prove it, maybe she was going to help him locate Curley!

Jeff went on building up his dream. He saw himself ramming in to the Rocking-J, and saying wide-handed to old Eagle-beak: "Well, here's my scatter-brained kid brother all safe. And the ugly lobo with his hands tied and the two punched eyes, that's El Tigre. And this here, now, beautiful brunette creature—this is my wife. She was a dancer. Her name is Dolores."

One look at Dolores, and blonde Judy Jackson would be plumb dispossessed of any notion about if he was good with women or not. . . . No—no, he couldn't do that to Judy. She'd be plumb hurt. She was a game little bantam. She'd carry it off all right. But afterwards she'd go in the house and cry for a year. And he didn't want Judy crying over a saddle bum like him. May be he'd better pass up the Rocking-J, and just drift with Dolores. Judy would forget him after while. Great little kid . . . why in hell couldn't a fellow have two women?

FROM out in the big room Dolores' plaintive spider song was interrupted by two gunshots. Mexican curses in a ragged volley echoed the gun thunder.

Jeff started. The shots weren't part of the dance. The *cantina* now should have been tensely silent as Dolores fought feebly the enmeshing spider web. Jeff stepped forward, slicing his hand against the door latch. The latch clicked, that was all. The door did not open; it had been bolted from the outside! Jeff butted shoulders against the door. The stout oak barely tremored.

Out in the big room the babble grew louder. Jeff's eyes lanced, located the inevitable loop-hole with which North Mexican *cantina* doors are provided. Thrusting aside the wooden lid, he looked out through the hole. Vision gave onto the dingy bar. The rest of the room was cut from sight by the hallway door.

Jeff saw all he needed to. Sitting on the bar, slim legs dangling, was Dolores. Her face shone with tremulous passion as she relaxed against the shoulder of a man standing close, with one arm thrown possessively around her.

The man's other arm was raking out in swaggering invitation for all to come to the bar and drink. Jeff, from his loop-hole, caught a glimpse of an ornate *charo* jacket underneath the newcomer's chartreuse-colored *serape.* A black mask covered half the man's face. He wore a steeple-crowned hat from which dangled, not silver *conchos,* but tiger claws!

All at once his gesturing hand snaked

to holster, filled, roared a single lead slug across the room. Jeff heard a cursing shriek from some man out of sight. The ivory-handled six-shooter flashed back to holster, the hand continued its interrupted beckoning, and the voice in thick Spanish roared:

"Up to the bar! Drink with El Tigre and his woman!"

Men seething forward to drink blotted everything from Jeff's view except Dolores' head thrown back in an abandon of merriment. Her black hair swished and yellow light glowed on the soft curve of throat and breasts as her bare arm raised high a diminutive glass.

"To El Tigre!" she shouted the toast.

And Jeff, who had thought he knew all about women, especially brunettes, was thinking that after all, Judy Jackson was right; he didn't know anything.

"Played me for a doggie!" he gritted. "She knew El Tigre was coming. She knew I was gunning for him. She got me corraled in here so I couldn't take him. When my minute comes, I'm locked up in a dance-hall girl's room! Shake-brained kid brother couldn't of got hooked worse himself!"

He shot a look over his head at the slope of corrugated iron weighted with roofing tiles. No escape there. There was one chance though. He whipped his knife from pocket, dropped to his knees, and commenced drilling into the adobe wall at a point near the corner of the iron-bound window frame. The long blade gritted in the mud, sun-dried, time-packed.

Afterwards he emptied his pockets of gun cartridges and used the heavy knife to pry out leads. There was deft frenzy to his movements. He considered it no sacrilege when he tore sheets from the holy testament laying there near Dolores' improvised altar. He poured the powder from the opened gun cartridges onto the testament sheets, and rolled them up, somewhat as he would have rolled a corn-husk cigarette. Then, inserting the testament-cartridge into the hole he had drilled in the wall, he carefully packed the 'dobe drillings around the extended fuse—twisted yarn he had taken from Dolores' sewing box, and which he had dipped in the melted tallow of the crucifixial light.

When the explosion came the tiny room rocked to the fiery blast. Flint-like 'dobe particles bulleted in ten thousand fragments. But Jeff was lying flat on the floor with Dolores' feather-bed mattress and quilts over him.

Gun muzzles pounded at the hallway door as he heaved up, groping through the choke of powder smoke. Would he find a hole blown through to the outside, some of the window bars loosened? Or had the explosion merely blown out surface 'dobe? Would he find life—or death?

He found life. At least for a moment with his body weaving, squirming, following his kicking feet out the hole, he thought he had. Then the door burst open and bullets drove like hail from the hallway. With his head and shoulders framed in that hole in the wall, gun-lead pludded close. A dozen black gouges appeared in the whitewashed 'dobe.

Then he got his own gun into action. He had the whole doorway for a target. He cleared that doorway with the third shot.

IT was veering onto midnight when Jeff, under the loom of a canyon cliff, eased out of saddle, tied his horse to a scrubby live-oak, and melted away with gun in hand into dark-clumped *manzañita.*

Ahead a short distance the man and woman he trailed had stopped to throw bed-rolls. He knew because from higher up he had caught their actions in the moon glimmer. Back at the Inn of Spiders after blasting his way to freedom, he had watched from the shadows while the man

he hunted lifted Dolores to a horse. Jeff had seen the tiger-clawed hat waving high as they rode furiously away, the man and his woman.

Jeff couldn't afford to be selective about the horse he forked in taking their trail. The important thing was: he did manage to get a horse and follow. And now he was closing in. In a matter of minutes, he told himself bleakly, he would have El Tigre's life, or El Tigre would deliver up Curley alive and unhurt. . . .

Jeff was wrong both ways. El Tigre didn't die and he made no promises in regard to the kid brother. He did make promises, dire ones, concerning Jeff. He promised, among other things, to stake him out in the sun on top of an ant hill, stripped naked and coated with cane syrup. And considering that he had a gun in Jeff's ribs when he said it—with twenty more bandit guns ringing Jeff in—El Tigre was in fine fettle to make his promise good.

All Jeff could do was blink with the realization that he had been more completely ambushed than he had believed it possible for a bush-wise man to be. While he had slipped forward through the *manzañita,* El Tigre and his twenty guerrillas had swept in from behind. Jeff's mind seethed in tragic speculation. To have closed in from that direction, the bandit and his woman must have contacted the band from up ahead among shadowed cliffs and swung back in a short half circle.

Such a coup seemed hardly possible. But here he was, looking down the black muzzles of twenty guns. It was easy now to believe all the fantastic border stories he had heard of this swaggering killer.

El Tigre was not masked now. A dusting of starlight revealed the puma claws dangling from the steeple-crowned hat; and under the hat the bandit's saturnine face, the cruel glint of his eyes. He was not a big man, but wiry, boiling with raw energy. Dolores was nowhere in sight, spotted evidently at some safe distance.

After disarming Jeff, El Tigre put on a demonstration of unutterable viciousness with no reason for it except sadistic gratification of an animal nature. He gun-whipped Jeff. Even with his prisoner unconscious in the dust, the bandit, his teeth a white blotch between thin-drawn lips, continued raking Jeff's ribs with his booted foot—and El Tigre's boots were fitted with big-roweled spurs the size of silver dollars.

A man laughed harshly. *"Cuidado capitan!* Watch out! You will leave nothing for the ants."

WHEN Jeff regained consciousness he found himself lying painfully on the earthen floor of a small hut. The door was closed. Pale star-glow seeped in at the unglassed window, shadowed every few minutes by the steeple-crowned hats of bandoleered guards as they shuffled endlessly outside with ready rifles.

Lying there in the empty room, tied hand and feet, Jeff thought again of Dolores and her spider dance. Now for a certainty the web spun by that lean and hungry spider, El Tigre, was enmeshing him in its death tangle—as it had without doubt already enmeshed Curley.

Grimly, Jeff wondered what part the woman of El Tigre had played in the snaring of Curley. The kid was such a set-up for a red-lipped smile. Though when it came to that, Jeff realized piercingly, he hadn't done much better. . . . How long did a man live staked out in the sun, his body black with the crawling horror of ants eating on him?

He thought of blonde Judy Jackson, soft and slim and cool in gay summer gingham; Judy, looking at him with a smouldering promise in her blue eyes. It seemed very long ago and far away.

How long would Judy wait for him, he wondered, before she married someone else.

From outside the hut came a muffled interchange of Spanish. Jeff caught the servile words: *"Claro, capitan, claro!"*

So El Tigre had come! And the guard was saying: "Of course!"

The door opened and a man stepped inside. His upraised arm characteristically held a fold of his *serape* across his face. Looking up from the floor Jeff could see, silhouetted against the door full of star-dusted sky, those puma claws dangling from the big hat.

A growled order permeated from behind the *serape.*

A guard mumbled quick response: *"Claro, claro, Capitan El Tigre,"* and closed the door upon the two.

Jeff caught the glint of a knife from among the *serape's* folds and he knew rather positively that he was not destined to be staked out on an ant hill. A favorite story at the Inn of Spiders was the one about El Tigre cutting the living heart out of a man.

Then instantly there was the effect of a cool sweet wind blowing. The impression was caused by a voice—a familiar voice. Low, tensely-whispered words in English—his brother's voice!

"Hold still," Curley's voice warned. "I'm cutting your ropes with this knife."

CURLEY shoved a six-gun in each of Jeff's released hands, dropped a handful of cartridges in his coat pocket.

"But kid, how in hell did you . . . where did you—"

"Save it," Curley jerked. "Stretch yourself some, then we'll be takin' a quick breeze out of here—before they get smart and lock us in."

From outside a commotion welled loud: foreign shouts, jabberings, curses. The noise grew closer, as though men were rushing down upon the hut.

Curley's young lips tightened. "I was afraid so! One of those bandoleered hombres didn't quite savvy my disguise. He's found out there's two El Tigre's in camp!"

"We've got to rush 'em, kid," Jeff said. "It's the nearest to an even break we'll get. What's the line-up outside?"

"You go one way, I'll go the other; we'll meet behind the hut, make a streak into the *manzañita.* I've got horses hid."

They came out shooting, the Menard brothers. Shoulder to shoulder, four guns blazing, they burst upon El Tigre's forward rushing men. The surprise, the stark ferocity of the brothers' gun-roaring appearance, gave them momentary advantage.

But before either of the brothers had reached the near corners of the mud hut, bandit guns reached out for them in a wave of close thunder. The sticky half-darkness was alive with orange flame as guns bloomed like monstrous orchids. The air was full of the whine and suck and slam of close lead.

From out of the blurred nightmare, framed in saffron gun blasts, Jeff glimpsed the bandit leader, El Tigre, ramming forward, face contorted, six-gun belching flame. Unrelated details touched his brain. He heard a dog bark somewhere, or thought he did. He heard a woman scream . . . he knew he did. She screamed twice. He wondered if it could be Dolores, and felt a sharp pang. The woman of El Tigre was too pretty, too young, too firmly soft . . . something haywire about a world that would let a bullet smash and tear through Dolores' flesh—perhaps one of his own unaimed slugs!

One of the bandoleered guards around the corner of the house boomed his rifle almost in Jeff's stomach. Jeff's side-twist

saved him. The bullet drew some blood.

El Tigre was nowhere in sight now. The thought struck at Jeff that maybe the bandit leader had turned back to go to the woman who had screamed, leaving it for his guerrillas to riddle the two scampering rabbits. Then Jeff was back of the hut and Curley was yelling: "Follow me!"

Bullets cruised after them, searching them out in the dark-shadowed *manzañita.* They swung to one side, left the bullets chopping in another direction through matted branches. They reached the arroyo where Curley's horses waited.

"Nice going, kid," Jeff gasped. "We didn't get El Tigre, but he didn't get us."

Then Jeff saw how pale his brother's face was in the night light. Jeff reached out. "Kid," his voice cut in anguish, "did you stop a slug? Where?"

"I'm all right," Curley said. "But the horses—there should be three; there's only two. I left Dolores here to watch!"

The plud of hoofs in sand wafted from just beyond the canyon bend.

"That'll be Dolores!" Curley said.

"Maybe El Tigre!" Jeff warned.

They were both right. It was Dolores *and* El Tigre. But, the bandit was being dragged over the ground at the end of a lariat tied to Dolores' saddle horn.

Curley only stared. But Jeff bent over the unconscious bandit. "He's got a bad conk on the head," he said.

"The conk I did with a rock, *señor,*" Dolores explained. "Perhaps you heard my scream when the guns were fighting, no? I screamed for him to come to me and he did. And I have—conk his head and brought him here."

It was Jeff who stared now. His racing thoughts had oriented themselves. He was seeing a clear picture. Why, this girl had been straight right from the first! She had been working with Curley—against El Tigre, whose attentions she loathed. When Curley, masked, and disguised as El Tigre, had made his dramatic appearance at the Inn of Spiders, it had been for the purpose of luring the bandit to expose himself. And the ruse had worked. Grapevine telegraph had flashed the news of the imposter to El Tigre. And El Tigre with his men had come gunning.

Jeff, trailing Curley and the girl from the Inn of Spiders, in the belief that he followed El Tigre, had fallen prey to the guerrilla band as it swept in from behind. And the disturbance occasioned by Jeff's capture had served to warn Curley and Dolores and allow them to escape.

With his mind straight on the realities, Jeff, for a flash, started dreaming ahead. Why say now, his idea back at the Inn of Spiders wasn't so far off-trail after all. He *would* be riding in to the old Rocking-J, and with him would go the irresponsible kid brother, the captive El Tigre, and—and Jeff Menard's beautiful Mexican wife? Say now, why not? Dolores had shown plainly that she liked him. . . .

CURLEY'S low laugh as he reached up and pulled Dolores half out of the saddle to kiss her, jarred upon Jeff's dreaming. What Curley said next jarred more.

"I got to laugh when I think how old Eagle-beak's face is gonna look when I come whammin' in to the Rockin'-J and say: here's my scatter-brained big brother all safe. And this greasy tarrantula with his hands tied, that's El Tigre. And this here, now, baby brunette—this is my wife. She was a dancer. Her name is Dolores."

"Huh?" Jeff gulped.

"Sure. We been married six days now."

Jeff pawed weakly at his stubbled chin—and started building himself a new dream. "Let's get goin'," he said. "Let's get goin'. Judy Jackson is gonna be plumb worried about me."

TINHORN'S LAST

by Luke Short

(Author of "Guns for a Peacemaker," etc.)

Black Jack Binney, gambler, was playing another man's hand when he came to Twin Forks to win a fortune with crooked cards. But there he found a game much bigger than his own mean tinhorn schemes—a game of blackmail and murder—a game of bloody poker with a girl in the pot—and the chance for once in his false-face life to do something big for somebody else.

AS THE stage swung into the main street of Twin Trails, Black Jack Binney, gambler, leaned back in the seat and breathed a sigh of relief. In another minute, he would be out from under the cold, scornful gaze of the girl opposite him. They were the only passengers, and for seven hours—since they left Lobato Wells, in fact—Black Jack had been subjected to her hostile, superior scrutiny. His first easy attempts at the camaraderie of travelers had met with a silent rebuff, and one long look at the beautiful oval face so cold and grave, had not encouraged him to persist. The journey had been utterly silent.

GAMBLE

Rapid Action Boom-Camp Novelette

As the stage rolled to a stop in front of the crowd at the Wells Fargo office, Black Jack opened the door, stepped down, and with ironic courtesy assisted the girl to the street.

"Thank you," she said coldly; then, turning to the agent she said in a friendly voice: "May I have my trunk now, Jim?"

"Sure thing, Miss Nancy. How was the visit?"

"Perfect, thanks."

Black Jack was about to ask for his trunk too, when he felt a hand laid on his arm. He turned to confront a gangling, red-headed puncher on whose vest hung a deputy's star.

"Gambler, huh?" the deputy asked, not very pleasantly.

Black Jack nodded dryly. Since he was wearing a black frock coat, striped trousers, white linen, black Stetson and a string tie, he judged his profession was fairly obvious. If that failed to identify him, his dark opaque eyes, his still lean face that was paler than the average, his fine soft hands barren of work callouses should have told of his trade. Pearl handed six-guns rode low on his thighs and he had an air of easy elegance.

"You ain't heard then that the Council is closin' down gamblin' here?" the deputy demanded.

"When?"

"In ten days."

"I did hear it," Black Jack replied coldly. "If you aim to run me out, that makes you ten days early, don't it?"

The deputy flushed and was about to answer when the girl standing nearby interrupted him.

"Is that true, Eddie?"

"Yes'm. Ten days to go, Miss Nancy, then we'll be shut of 'em."

The girl's cold stare traveled to Black Jack again. Her hair was pale with the glint of late October sunlight, and the deep blue of her traveling dress served to heighten her pallor.

"It's high time," she said to the deputy, but she looked at Black Jack. "They should have been kept out when the boom began."

"It ain't too late," the red-head answered grimly. He turned to Black Jack. "I'm not runnin' you out. I'm just warnin' you."

"Thanks," Black Jack said dryly.

He tipped his hat to the girl, then elbowed through the crowd to the sidewalk. In the stage office, he left instructions for the disposition of his trunk, then he strolled down the street toward the four corners.

TWIN TRAILS had little to distinguish it from other boom towns of the West. Its false-front stores flanked a dusty street thronged with buckboards, saddle horses and thundering ore wagons. But, common as it was, the sight of it made Black Jack's eyes shine. Here was where he hoped to make a killing—a sure-thing clean up. Ten days, the deputy said. That was enough.

He went immediately to the only saloon in town, the Mountain Rose. As he entered, the noise of its crowd, the rank smell of tobacco smoke and alcohol brought a wry frown to his face after a day in the open.

Of a bartender he asked: "Where'll I find Mister Horner?"

The barkeep jerked his head toward a door beyond the far end of the bar, and Black Jack threaded his way through the crowd to it.

His knock brought a summons to enter, and he opened the door which let into a small cubby hole of a room lighted by a single high window.

Tom Horner, owner of the Mountain Rose, was seated at a littered desk over which he could survey the door. He was a big man gone to fat, almost bald, loose of face, and the clothes he wore were as loud as his voice when he asked:

"Well?"

"I heard you had a table open for a dealer."

"Who said so?"

"People," Black Jack replied.

Horner leaned back in his chair and wedged an unlit cigar in the corner of his mouth. "Ain't you heard about the Council rulin'?" he asked gruffly.

Black Jack nodded.

"I'm havin' a merry hell of a time keepin' the dealers I got," Horner said, eyeing him suspiciously. "They all want to get away while the gettin's good. How come you want it for only ten days?"

"I'm on my way to the Sarvis Springs boom," Black Jack replied. "I thought I might as well pick up the price of the fare."

"What's your game? Just faro?"

"Anything," Black Jack said. "You see my name is—Black Jack Binney."

"Not the gent that busted Virginia City in that big Black Jack game?" Horner gasped.

The gambler nodded.

"Well, well," Horner said softly, then removed the cigar from his mouth, rose and shook hands. "I heard of your luck—everybody has. Sure I can give you a table. Lessee. Cable will leave if I let him. I'll tell him to finish out tonight and you'll take over tomorrow. All right?"

Black Jack said that it was.

"Just drift around tonight and get acquainted—sit in a poker game or do whatever you want." Horner regarded Black Jack with curious scrutiny. "Funny, a gent like you that needed a trunk to take away his winnin's once is ridin' the gambler's grub line."

Black Jack shrugged. "That's luck for you, Horner." About to go, he paused and turned. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell my name—right away."

Horner smiled, nodded; and Black Jack left.

AT the bar, he asked of the bartender: "Where'll I get some cards in town?"

"Across the street at Curry's. That's where all ours come from."

Black Jack thanked him and stepped out into the street. He did not go to Curry's immediately, but went to the hotel, registered, and got a room. His trunk was brought up and he opened it. Then he changed from his immaculate clothes into soiled range clothes, picked up a small black bag which was in his trunk and went downstairs and across the street to Curry's. It was just getting dusk, not quite time to light lamps, and Black Jack smiled a little as he stepped into the general store, thinking how nicely timed it was.

The store was a big place, devoid of customers except for two in the rear. Black Jack waited until they had gone, then went to the counter. An old man, kindly and bent, was tending store.

"I want a pack of cards," Black Jack announced.

The old man nodded, turned to the shelves behind him, reached up and brought down a box which contained almost a dozen loose packs of cards. Black Jack took one, and the box was replaced.

"What else now, son?" the old man asked pleasantly.

"Let me think," Black Jack drawled. "Oh, a saw. A one man cross cut. Got one?"

"Plenty," the old man assured him. "Four foot?"

"That'll do."

The old man turned and walked to the rear of the store, as Black Jack had calculated he would. When he had disappeared from sight, Black Jack put a hand on the counter ready to vault it. Only then did he discover that there was another person in the store, a boy of sixteen or so who was watching him from the opposite counter.

Black Jack caught himself just in time, cursing softly, then called to the boy: "Say, tell dad to make that four and a half foot, will you?"

"You betcha'," the youngster answered willingly, and went back.

Black Jack acted quickly. He vaulted the counter, got the card box, took out the dozen decks and substituted for them the dozen new decks which he had been carrying in his black bag. It was only a matter of seconds before the store cards

were in his bag and he was standing on the other side of the counter.

The old man returned with the saw. "Little huskier'n you figgered for, huh?" he joked pleasantly. "Well, time you got to workin' in diggin's, you'll wish you'd bought a three foot."

Black Jack smiled pleasantly, paid, thanked the old man and left.

He returned to the hotel, put the saw under the bed, dressed again, then headed for the cafe whose sign he could see down the street. The town was just beginning to light up for the night. In the dusk, no one would have noticed the look of self-loathing on Black Jack's face, nor his shaking hands. It was bad enough to pose as Black Jack Binney, the famous young gambler of Virginia City. But even that was not as bad as cheating an old man like Curry.

For the cards Black Jack had substituted there in the store were marked—marked so skillfully by a little painting of the scroll work on their backs that Black Jack could read them and be safe. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Buzzard's Blackmail

BLACK JACK found that he had no appetite for food, so he sat by himself at the end of the counter smoking steadily and drinking black coffee, rehearsing his scheme. It had started innocently enough when, in Lobato Wells three days ago, he had met and talked with a gambler who had just quit his table here at the Mountain Rose.

In the course of conversation, Black Jack had asked the gambler about Chuck Britten, a wild young hellion with a ranch near Twin Trails whose fame as a gambling spendthrift had even reached Lobato Wells. Britten had inherited a cattle kingdom from his father who had been mysteriously killed six months before. Since that time, young Britten had gambled away twenty-five thousand head of cattle and was well into his second twenty-five thousand.

"You get any of it?" Black Jack had asked.

"Not a chance, Horner's got him sewed up. The kid comes in almost every night, gets in a poker game with Horner and some others and loses his shirt."

"Is Horner forked?" Black Jack had asked.

The gambler had grinned. "If he ain't, he'll do till a forked jasper comes along."

That had decided Black Jack. Up till now, he had been an honest gambler, but he was sick of living by his wits. He wanted to make a clean-up and get out of it. Britten was fair game, a no-good wastrel. Horner was a crook. What harm to cheat a pair like that?

And now, he reflected, everything was set. He had a table, his cards were planted, and he had ten days to go. "If I can't get in a game with Britten in ten days, I'm a bigger sucker than he is," he mused cynically. But even as he did so, the picture of the girl's cold, contemptuous face rose in his mind and accused him, mocked him.

AT the Mountain Rose a houseman gave over his poker table to Black Jack. For three hours the play was slow, and Black Jack, in shirt-sleeves, played indifferent stud, watching the crowd.

At ten o'clock when the crowd began to increase the game at Black Jack's small limit table broke up. He was cashing in chips as the doors swung open and a crowd of five men shouldered through them. Their leader was a young man, hatless, in rough range clothes. His pleasantly ugly face was tanned to a golden brown, but his cheeks were sunken, his eyes bloodshot, and when he ordered the

bartender to set up the house, his voice was thick with drink.

He spotted Black Jack sitting alone at the green-felted table, and came over to him.

"Like some poker?" the young man asked.

"Any time," Black Jack replied.

"My name's Britten," the stranger announced. "You're new." Black Jack introduced himself, trying to keep the exultation out of his voice.

Horner, who had been watching the faro game, broke away and walked over to the table.

"Well, young fella', feelin' lucky?" he boomed jovially.

"Some," Britten said thickly, grinning. "Let's get up a game."

Black Jack got up, playing his part with full courtesy, since it seemed unlikely that Horner would want to play one of his own men with house money. But Horner waved him into his seat again, then called a swamper.

"Go over to Curry's and get a couple of new decks," Horner told him. "Kick up Gilmore over at the Land Office, then go over to the hotel and tell Matson we got a game up."

While they were waiting, Britten bought a couple of drinks for himself and Horner. Black Jack sized him up. He might have been twenty-two, but there was no youth in his eyes. Black Jack saw the weariness, the despair, a kind of desperation in his eyes, the like of which he had seen only once before in the eyes of a hunted gun-man, a rider of the owl-hoot. Britten was obviously shaky from his weeks and months of drinking. His body was strong, lithe and tough, but the circles under his eyes showed his dissipation, and he had the forced good-humor of those who are afraid of themselves in drink. Horner, Black Jack noticed, was distracting Britten with a patter of harmless talk.

The swamper returned with the two decks of cards, and with two men, who were introduced to Black Jack. Gilmore was a tall, indolent man with a whiskey-veined face that was expressionless as his voice. Black Jack tagged him immediately as a man to watch. Matson, the Twin Trails banker, was fat and jovial, but even his constant laughing couldn't hide the predatory gleam of his eyes. They were a pair of vultures, Black Jack decided.

As house man, he banked, and as he made the first crisp, lightning-swift shuffle and deal, he wondered what Horner's game was. Not that he cared—for he was playing with his own marked cards.

It took three hands for Black Jack to see it, then he laughed to himself. Horner wasn't crooked; he was just a mighty good poker player. And Britten was unbelieveably bad. Horner knew it, and so did Gilmore and Matson. Through the simple process of the three of them bucking Britten by staying out of each others sure pots, and by running sandys that made Black Jack wince, they were bleeding Britten dry. The kid was a sucker, not even a graduate of the bunkhouse penny-a-match games, and he was playing for stakes that made Black Jack's eyes shine.

Though he held good cards, Black Jack took only an occasional hand. He let the play ride that way for an hour. Then, imperceptibly, he began to take a few pots, concentrating on Gilmore and Matson. The hands they held were transparent to him, yet every pot he took was plausible.

"Your luck comes late," Horner growled, When Black Jack raked in a stack of blues that would have filled his hat.

"I got to nurse it along," Black Jack replied carelessly. In the last hour, he

had come to a surprising conclusion. Britten was losing purposely. He wasn't playing his hands to win, and twice Black Jack had seen him bury flushes that would have taken big pots.

So he started in. He knew neither Gilmore nor Matson would quit now, since they had a good deal of Britten's money and were getting more. Black Jack played it to leave Britten alone and take from Gilmore and Matson.

In another hour, he had them cleaned, and Horner was only a little better off. Britten was strapped and drunk.

Horner threw down his hand. "Hell, I'm a cripple. Let's call it quits—unless you want to go on, Binney."

"Suits me," Gilmore said hastily, his eyes savage with ill-temper.

Black Jack shrugged. "No use buckin' your luck, gents. There's always tomorrow."

The chips were cashed in, and the game broke up, Gilmore and Matson drifted out, Britten went to the bar.

Horner lagged behind while Black Jack split the money and gave him the house share. Horner took it, and stared at Black Jack a long time, the suspicion in his eyes was not quite hidden.

"I can understand that Virginia City luck, Binney," he said finally. "When you got it, you got it."

BLACK JACK nodded carelessly and drifted to the bar, where Britten was drinking by himself.

There he leaned an elbow on the smooth mahogany and rubbed his eyes. "I picked up a headache in that game."

"So did I," Britten said gloomily.

"Reckon I'll take a walk. Which way you goin'?"

"Livery stable." Britten said, and finished his drink.

Outside, the night was cool, the street deserted. They walked in silence a half block, then Black Jack said:

"Mind some advice?"

"I know what it'll be," Britten said sullenly. "Stop gamblin'."

"You hit it. Mister, your game's not poker. Stay away from it."

"I—" Britten began hotly, then checked himself. "I reckon you're right."

Black Jack stopped, and faced Britten. "You're not drunk."

Britten said nothing. They were standing in the mouth of a dark alley. Black Jack looked up and down the street, then spoke to the younger man.

"Do you always sit in a game and let two pair take a thirteen hundred dollar pot when you hold three aces?"

Britten still said nothing.

Black Jack snorted. "What's the matter? Why don't you let one of those three rannies stick you up with all the cash you've got to your name and get it over with?"

He saw it coming, the hook, and he ducked, grabbing Britten's forearm in a vice-like grasp.

"Cut it!" he said savagely. "You damn fool, do you think I'm goin' to blackmail you because I know those three jaspers are?"

Britten's arm dropped to his side. "Damn your meddling soul! What business is it of yours?"

Black Jack shrugged. "None," he said quietly. "I—I wanted to help you, that's all."

"Then keep away from me!" Britten flared.

"All right," Black Jack said evenly. "I made a mistake. Forget it. At first I thought you were a no-good fresh kid. When I saw you, I thought you looked like a man in a jam. And when I saw you lose that money tonight, I knew you were bein' blackmailed. But it's none of my business. I'll—"

A SOUND of something scraping on sand back in the alley cut his speech short. He acted like an explosion, hooking out with his left at Britten's face and throwing himself down as the roar of a six-gun filled the alley.

Black Jack rolled over, streaking out a gun with his free arm, and fanned it toward the spot where the orange flare had winked.

Then it was quiet. He heard a low gurgling moan, the slump of a body into the dirt, then the rapid tattoo of retreating footsteps.

"Get you?" Britten whispered.

"No. But I got someone."

Black Jack walked rapidly down the alley, Britten behind him. When he stumbled over something, he stopped, struck a match and kneeled.

"Gilmore," he said quietly. One of his shots had caught the land agent in the face, another in the chest.

Black Jack looked up at Britten. "Who was it meant for?"

Britten's answer was slow in coming, then he said sullenly: "You."

"Because they overheard I was on to their blackmail game, huh?"

Britten nodded, and the match died, burning Black Jack's fingers. He stood up.

"I dunno' about you, but I'm hightailin' it. The jasper with Gilmore was likely Matson and he'll tell Horner, and he'll hang it on me if it costs him his saloon."

Britten said nothing, and Black Jack tried to see his face. In five fast minutes, a fortune had slipped through his hands just because he had taken pity on this young and sullen kid. With savage resignation, Black Jack drew the wad of bills from his pocket and offered them to Britten.

"Here. I cheated you out of this," he said, his voice flat with scorn. "I wish you could buy some guts with it."

Britten did not offer to take the money, so Black Jack dropped it, turned, and started down the alley. He heard Britten following him, felt him lay a hand on his arm.

"Wait."

Black Jack stopped. "Make it quick."

"Come with me. I'll hide you."

Black Jack made a swift summary of his chances. They weren't so good. He'd have to steal a horse or borrow one. He didn't know the country. If his luck didn't hold, he'd be swinging from a cottonwood at this time tomorrow night. Already, he could hear shouts on the street.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "Hurry it up."

Britten trotted ahead, turned down another alley that ran behind the business section, and, keeping in shadow, followed it until they came to a big corral.

"These are all my saddles," he told Black Jack, indicating a dozen just inside the rear door of the stable. "I've got half a dozen horses here. Take any. They'll think I was drunk."

In five minutes, they had made their exit from town through devious and winding alleys. The night was utterly dark, and Black Jack followed the sound of Britten's horse.

"We'll have a posse after us as soon as Matson and Horner can convince the sheriff you gulched Gilmore," Britten said.

"Yeah," the gambler said indifferently. He was thinking of what he had lost. A chance for nine nights of poker games like tonight, and he had tossed it away.

"If you think I'm goin' to tell you anything about myself, you're damned well mistaken," Britten blurted out suddenly.

"Keep it," Black Jack said shortly.

"I will. Let's ride."

CHAPTER THREE

Bushwhack Payoff

A LITTLE more than an hour later, they pulled their lathered horses to a halt in the corral lot of the Rafter B, the Britten spread.

Even the night couldn't disguise its size. The big, dark, two story frame house lay smothered in cottonwoods. Around it lay the bulk of the barns, sheds and corrals.

Britten pulled up at a long low outbuilding. "Stay here," he said shortly. "I'll get a bedroll and grub."

Black Jack waited. He heard Britten walk away, then he heard the sound of footsteps coming toward him from the direction of the dark house.

A woman's voice said: "Chuck?"

"He'll be back in a minute."

"Who are you?"

"Binney's the name."

"Did you bring Chuck home drunk?"

"He did not, sis," Britten answered from the dark. He lighted a lantern while Black Jack dismounted.

"Nancy, this is—"

"Mister Binney," the girl said coldly, and at the scorn in her voice, Black Jack whirled. It was the girl of the stage coach. And again Black Jack looked into those wide, depthless violet eyes, saw again the slight figure wrapped now in an old overcoat; heard again the voice so cold, so emotionless.

He removed his hat and bowed. Now Black Jack understood the girl's hatred of gamblers.

Another man walked into the circle of lantern-light, a squat, heavy man in puncher's clothes. He had a strangely long face and a scraggly brown mustache.

"Binney, this is Hibbing, our foreman."

Black Jack shook hands with him.

"Are you going to make our guest sleep in the barn?" Nancy asked seeing the bedroll her brother had brought out with him.

"In that aspen copse north of the barn," Britten said. "Binney got into—well, a scrape in town, and they'll likely be after him tonight or tomorrow."

"Were you drunk again, Chuck?" Nancy asked quietly.

Britten flushed, and nodded.

"And lost more money?"

Again he nodded.

The girl looked at Black Jack. "To him, I suppose."

"Now look here, sis—" Britten began, but she ignored him.

"Another buzzard," she said quietly, looking at Black Jack. "They always gather when something goes sick, don't they?" And she turned and walked away toward the house.

Britten looked uncomfortably at Black Jack, then spoke to the foreman. "Gus, I don't know what's goin' to happen, but Binney here has got to stay hid. If they take me off, carry grub and water out to him. If nothin' happens all day tomorrow, give him a horse and take him out of the country."

"If they take you, Britten," Black Jack cut in, "I'm goin' too. I was the one that pulled that gun, not you."

Britten smiled sardonically. "Do you think—you know who I mean. Do you think he'd let me lie in jail? I'll be out, if he's got to buy the law to do it."

"I forgot that," Black Jack gibed, and he saw Britten flush.

Hibbing picked up the lantern and they headed out past the biggest barn, past a series of corrals, up a little knoll and into a popular thicket choked by underbrush. After beating his way twenty yards or so into the brush, Britten threw down the bedroll.

"You can suit yourself," he said to

Black Jack, "but if you don't want to have the deadwood hung on you, you'd better stay here."

"I don't."

"Don't come out, even if you see them ride up and get me."

Black Jack nodded. They looked at each other a long moment, Britten's eyes harried, sullen and defiant, Black Jack's a little mocking.

Then Britten turned, and Hibbing following him into the darkness.

BLACK Jack blew out the lantern and lay on his bedroll and built a cigarette.

He had been in the country less than twelve hours. He had come here intending to clean out a cocky, no-good kid by a crooked card game. And there he was, his set-up spoiled for good, waiting to be framed for a murder, hiding out in the protection of this same kid who was being black-mailed out of a sizeable fortune.

Black Jack decided to run out. He stood up and made his way to the edge of the copse. The house was lighted now, he saw, and instantly he divined that it was someone after him. Britten's warning to stay in the thicket flashed through his mind, but he disregarded it. He wanted to see what was going on.

He worked his way down to the big barn, and from there he could see a half dozen horses by the house.

Beside the barn was a corral with horses in it. By moving into the shadow, he could reach the wagon shed; then it was only a step to the bunkhouse where he could see plainly.

He bent down and moved swiftly to the corner of the corral. Quickly he crossed the twenty yards to the wagon shed, edged behind it to the far corner. He was about to fade over into the shadow of the bunkhouse when voices stopped him. He paused, stilled his breath and listened.

"—know it's him, I tell you."

"A thin jasper, sorta' tall, with a gambler's riggin'? Dark hair and face?"

"Sure. It was him." This was Hibbing's voice.

"And you say he's up in the poplar thicket?"

"Sure. Didn't I take him up with Chuck?"

"Good. Now listen, Gus. I'll ride off with the rest of them when they come out. Then I'll drop back with a busted cinch or somethin'. I'll come back here. We'll go up, and if it's him—this Binney—we'll down him. I'll tell Horner to split the pay between us."

"He ain't paid you yet?" Hibbing asked suspiciously.

"Horner? Hell, man, he ain't a fool. If he'd paid me, I'd of rode off and got drunk, and he knows it." The man laughed softly.

"He never give you anything?" Hibbing persisted. "Not even half? You remember that big job in September, he give us half before and half after."

"Yeah, but that was a tough job. He had to. He wants this Binney pretty bad, but not as bad as he wanted the other."

Hibbing was quiet a moment, then he said: "Well, I reckon we got to trust him. You drop—"

"Here they come!"

The conversation ceased. Black Jack saw a man walk out of the shadow of the bunkhouse and stride swiftly toward the horses.

The ranch-house door opened and several man came out, two of them holding young Britten.

"But I tell you I was so drunk I don't remember," Britten protested. "I was in the alley with someone, but I can't remember who."

"Maybe a night in jail will bring back your memory," a voice said.

"A man give me a match. That's all I can remember."

"Sure. A man give you a match, and you rode out of town leavin' a dead man. You got to do better than that, young man."

Hibbing walked out, apparently from the bunkhouse, to join them.

"Can you git us his horse, Gus?" the sheriff called. Hibbing walked over to the corral.

"Understand," the sheriff continued. "This ain't an arrest. But a man was killed, found in an alley. Someone saw you and this tin horn gambler go into the alley. I want to know what happened."

Britten was silent. His horse was brought, and the bunch of them mounted and rode off. Black Jack could see Nancy framed in the doorway, watching the posse ride off with her brother.

Hibbing sat down on the bunkhouse steps and lighted a cigarette. Until he chose to move, Black Jack was cornered. He squatted motionless against the wagon shed.

He did not think of the posse taking Britten, for that was to be expected. He was thinking of the overheard conversation between Hibbing and one of the posse men. Horner, then, was out to get him, for Black Jack had stumbled onto his blackmail scheme. And this bland, innocent looking Hibbing was a hired gulcher of Horner's by his own confession. . . .

BLACK Jack swore softly. At least he knew where the cards lay. A rider padded up softly in the night.

"Gus?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go. Think shots will wake any of the boys?"

"They're all out," Hibbing said, rising.

Black Jack waited until they walked off into the night, not in the direction of the poplar thicket, but to the south of it.

He dropped in behind them, his half-boots off. The night was so dark he had to travel carefully, and he was guided only by the sound of their voices.

Coming to an arroyo, he sensed their course. It pointed toward the poplar thicket. He unholstered a gun, and climbed the far bank. Once on the level again, he made a swift circle, taking desperate chances in the dark, and once he crashed into some brush that he was sure would give him away.

He wanted to cut them off before they made the thicket.

When he hit the arroyo again, he could hear voices.

"I'll pull up behind him. You walk out to the front. If he hears me comin', he may shoot, but it'll drive him out. Then let him have it."

They were close now, by the sound of their voices. When Black Jack heard them real close, he said: "You won't let anybody have it."

As he spoke, he leaped to one side in the dark.

A blast of gun-fire lighted up the night, and Black Jack took up the echo with his own three shots fired in venomous swiftness at the tell-tale gun flare.

Then he dropped on his face.

He heard a soughing moan. All hell broke loose as the other man opened up. Black Jack waited. The shooting ceased, and a man started to curse, started to walk toward him.

"I shoot in three seconds, mister, unless I hear your gun fall!" Black Jack whipped out. "It's empty! Drop it!"

He had a match in his hand, and when he heard the clank of metal on rock, he struck the match.

There was Hibbing, flat-footed, arms in the air, not twelve feet off. Beside him, on the ground, lay the other man, blood welling from his mouth.

Black Jack covered the distance to him before the match died. He rammed his gun in Hibbing's midriff.

"You move your arms and it moves your belly muscles. Your belly muscles move and this gun goes off. Got it?" the gambler said coldly.

"I got it."

"Now put your hands down slow. I've got a gun in my other hand. Put 'em down, and put 'em in your pocket."

Hibbing did as he was bid. Then Black Jack dropped his loosely looped belt over the man's head, slipped it down to his forearms, and yanked it tight. Then he turned Hibbing around and jabbed his gun in his back.

"Walk."

"Where to?"

"The house. To the girl."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kidnap Party

BLACK Jack chose the front door. His knock was answered surprisingly quickly. He prodded Hibbing into a wide, low front room, as the girl held the door open.

"Well?" she said coldly.

"I thought you might like to know this man is double-crossing you," Black Jack said, just as coldly.

"How?"

"He's workin' for Horner. He tried to kill me tonight, along with another jasper."

"What if he did?" Nancy said.

Black Jack's eyes narrowed. "You heard what your brother told him. Did he mean it—or do you beef everybody you put up for the night?" he asked insolently.

The girl flushed, and her gaze could not hold his. She motioned to a low, leather-covered davenport which was pulled up in front of the big fireplace where coals were still glowing. Navajo rugs covered the floor, and a huge one lay on the davenport. Black Jack motioned Hibbing to a seat close to the davenport.

"What about it, Gus?" the girl asked.

"Wait a minute," Black Jack cut in. He addressed Hibbing. "I was by the wagon-shed. I heard you frame it with the other jasper to drop out of the posse. You were to split what Horner would give you to get me out of the way. All right, now talk."

"It's a lie," Hibbing said promptly. "Miss Nancy, the man rooted me out of my bunk, put this belt around me, and brought me up here."

"Why, you—" Black Jack began, just as a thundering knock on the front door echoed through the house.

Black Jack cursed as the knock came again. He glanced around the room. No place to hide. Then his gaze fell on the davenport.

"Take that belt off him!" he ordered the girl.

She complied hastily. Then he addressed Hibbing.

"I'll be under that davenport, mister, and I'll see you and hear you. One word—about me that'll give it away and I'll let you have it—ten slugs, right in the chest. *Sabe?*"

There was real fright in Hibbing's eyes as he nodded.

Then Black Jack looked at the girl. He realized nothing he could say, no threat he could make, would induce her he keep his presence hidden. It lay with her alone.

He turned, dropped to his knees, and scrambled under the davenport, pulling the rug down so that he was sheltered. The knock came again, and this time it was almost a battering.

The girl opened the door, and Black Jack saw four pair of legs burst into the room.

"What do you want?" Nancy asked coldly.

"Did he get away, Gus?" a voice asked, ignoring the girl's question, and Black Jack immediately recognized it as Horner's.

"He nailed Reilly and lit a shuck, Tom," Hibbing muttered.

Horner addressed the girl now. "You haven't seen this gambler, this jasper that calls hisself Binney?"

"No," the girl answered immediately.

"Think," Horner said slowly. "What you answer may mean a lot to you."

"No," the girl said again.

"Ah," Horner said softly. "Then come along."

"You might's well tell her what for," another voice put in. It was Matson's. "The game's up."

"It's a kidnapin', girlie," Horner sneered. "If I could have got that tin-horn gambler shut up, we'd've got the money in little pieces anyway. But I'm takin' no chances. You're comin' with us."

"Money? What money?"

Horner laughed uglily. "All the money the Brittens own. That's what your ransom will be. Think your brother'll pay it?"

"Never!" the girl cried.

"Oh, yes he will," Horner sneered. "He'll do it and we'll skip the country. We're tired of—"

BLACK JACK counted their feet. There were four men here in the room, not counting Hibbing, and probably more outside. If he tried to stop them he would be cut to doll rags before he could get out from under the davenport.

"Where are you taking me?" Nancy asked.

Horner laughed, almost jovially. "Well, since you're so anxious, it's up to a shack in the Negros—way up past the head of Powder Creek, so's we can get the money and drift over the divide. How does it sound?"

"Cut it, Tom," Matson said uneasily. "Now we'll have to take Hibbing, since you've blabbed it."

"Take him?" Horner laughed. "Did yuh think I was such a damned fool I'd leave him? Dutch, you go in with her while she gets some clothes. Lee, go out and get some fresh horses. Hibbing, you stay set till we're ready."

Hibbing, from where he sat, could see Black Jack, and he was watching him with glittering eyes. Black Jack knew this was the time to make the break if he was going to, but he knew that Hibbing could make a getaway before Horner and Matson were shot down. The lamp was by his elbow. Black Jack cursed impotently. He was helpless.

He calculated his escape, for he knew as soon as Hibbing was out of hearing, he would tell Horner and they would make a desperate attempt to corner him.

The girl came out presently, and, along with Hibbing was ushered out into the night.

As soon as the door slammed, Black Jack rolled out from under the davenport, dived for the lamp and knocked it off the table. Then he picked it up and hurled it through a window at the north end of the room. Even as he did so, he heard Hibbing yell: "It's him! The gambler!"

Swiftly he moved to the south window, opened it noiselessly, and let himself out into the night, shutting it after him. As he dropped to the ground, he heard the house door crash open, and someone shout:

"He's gone! Busted a window!"

"He's afoot," Hibbing yelled. "We can ride him down!"

They raced out to their horses, and soon Black Jack heard them thunder off.

He crawled up toward the front of the house, and poked his head around. Matson's voice came clear to him.

"But he heard us, Man! He'll ride into town and buy himself free with the secret of where our hide-out is. Damn you, Horner, for a blab-mouth!"

"And damn you for an old woman, Matson!" Horner retorted scornfully. "There's other places in the mountains. Do we have to go there?"

"Name one."

Horner thought a minute. "Why, the old Circle Y line camp just this side of the pass. It's tumbled in, I reckon, but it'll do."

"Then let's go," Matson growled. "What does it matter if that damned son did hear us? Let's go. I say."

Black Jack weighed his chances of rescuing the girl. He could not see how many men were guarding her. He was afoot. They were mounted. If he gave his presence away, they would change their destination again, and Nancy would have to be ransomed.

So he waited for no more. Hugging the house, he faded back into the sheltering cottonwoods, made a wide circle and came in behind the corral. There was his horse, still saddled, where Hibbing had turned him into the corral. Noiselessly, Black Jack led him out the back, after letting down the bars. He walked him for a half mile, straight south, then mounted and turned east. Somewhere off there lay the road, and the road led to town.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jail Break!

FALSE dawn was just lighting up the east when Black Jack topped the rise north of Twin Trails. He remembered where the sheriff's office and jail were—on the main four corners, dobie jail in the rear—and he turned down the alley that ran behind it.

He dismounted behind the jail and looked up and down the street. The town was dark, quiet. He unloosened his Colts in their holsters, then strode boldly out into the street and turned toward the office. The door was closed.

Black Jack hesitated only a second, then he palmed the knob loudly and walked in. The room was dark, but he picked up the broken snoring of two men.

Wake them or sneak it? He decided on the bolder course. "Roll out!" he called, as he closed the door behind him. Half the snoring ceased and a thick voice said:

"Who is it?"

"Nancy Britten has been kidnaped," Black Jack announced to the dark. He recognized the voice of the grinning red-head.

"Les," the red-head called, and got a grunt for reply.

Then he struck a match, and stared into the barrels of Black Jack's twin Colts.

"Just hold it," Black Jack said evenly. He could see now that there were two cots in the room. The second deputy was sitting bolt upright.

"Get him a lamp," Black Jack said to this man. To the red-head he said: "And, mister, don't let that match die."

"F'r God's sake, hurry it up, Les," the red-head told his partner.

When the lamp was lighted, Black Jack stepped over and pulled the lone shade down.

"If you're looking for the sheriff, he ain't here," the red-head stammered. He was young, and his face was likeable and plain, and Black Jack could hardly keep from smiling.

"I don't want him, I want one of your prisoners," the gambler said.

"Which one do you want?" the youngster continued.

"Britten."

"Take him. Take another one if he don't suit you."

The second deputy had the keys, and Black Jack ordered him to open the door into the jail. It was done, and the gambler was about to step inside, when he took another look at the red-head.

"Maybe you two better come along."

The red-head grinned. "Maybe we had. You'd sure look funny locked in there with Chuck."

Prodding the undressed deputies before him, Black Jack entered the jail. Britten was in the end cell, awake, and he watched Black Jack's entry with open mouth.

"You!"

"Nancy's been kidnaped," Black Jack told him.

"Horner!" Britten whipped out. "Get me out of here!"

The gambler motioned with his gun to the door and the red-head stepped forward with the keys. Britten stepped out into the corridor and Black Jack motioned the two deputies into the cell.

"We ain't got any pants," the red-head protested.

"Yell then," Black Jack dared him.

The red-head gulped, grinned.

Down the corridor, one of the prisoners said: "Lemme out, mister. I was only drunk."

Black Jack shook his head, and the man cursed. Then he began to yell: "Jail break! Jail break! Help!"

BLACK JACK saw that it was useless to threaten, and he couldn't shoot the man. He spoke to Britten and they raced outside.

It took only a moment to ride double to the livery stable where they snaked out another horse, saddled it, and thundered out of town. Black Jack explained to Britten what had happened at the ranch.

Britten cursed bitterly. "I may swing for it, but I'll gun the head off that Horner!" Suddenly, he remembered Black Jack. "Binney, this isn't your fight. There'll be a posse after me. Clear out!"

"No," Black Jack said firmly.

"But, man, it's flat country between here and the Negros!" Britten persisted. "We'll be followed. Clear out while you can!"

"No."

Britten looked at him. "Is it Nancy?"

Black Jack nodded. "She could have given me away there at the house, but she didn't. I reckon I can fight for her now."

Britten said no more. By sunup, it was easy to see they were followed by a posse which sent up a long funnel of dust behind it. When they reached the foothills by midafternoon, they did not even rest.

When, in late afternoon, Black Jack thought he could go no farther Britten pulled up at the base of a steep, heavily wooded hogsback. Saddle stiff and weary, they picked their way up it.

Nearing the top, Britten lay down and crawled the last few yards. Over the hump below them in a rough basin surrounded by trees, lay a grassy park, and on the far side of it was a weathered log shack. A man sat in the door, a rifle across his knees. Behind the house was the corral, containing six horses.

"We'll circle the shack and drive off the horses. Then we've got them," Britten said grimly.

"You can't," Black Jack said dubiously.

"Watch me."

In another twenty minutes, they had made a wide circle around the hogsback and were lying in a thicket of scrub oak close to the corral. The rear of the shack, luckily, was windowless.

Britten waited a moment, listening, then rose and walked softly toward the corral. It was only the work of a few moments

to let down the bars and gently haze the horses out.

Black Jack watched, holding his breath. Suddenly, he saw a man stealthily round the far corner of the shack, spot Britten, and swing a rifle up to his shoulder.

Black Jack leaped clear of the underbrush, streaking his Colts up in a blind, desperate snap shot. Then he shot twice more, and ran for the near corner of the shack.

As he rounded the corner, he met another guard face to face. The guard shot with a six-gun from the hip, and Black Jack was slammed against the shack. At the same time he swiveled up his guns in deafening concert. Britten swung around the corner, and his guns joined Black Jack's until the guard went down.

Then, together, they dived for the door of the shack, heaved it open as a fusillade of shots blasted a welcome.

A LAMP was lighted against the dusk, and in that instant as Black Jack hurtled through the door he saw Horner in a far back corner, a carbine to his shoulder, already shooting. The fat bulk of Matson was almost hidden by an overturned table. The girl lay on the bunk. Hibbing, with smoking six-guns in his hands, was standing before her. Another puncher lay sprawled on the floor.

Black Jack whipped a shot at the light, then crashed to the floor on his face as thunder filled the room. Dimly, he saw Britten knocked back through the door by a slug, the youngster doggedly charged in again and slammed the door behind him.

Only the thin filter of dusk lit up the room as Black Jack turned his guns on Horner. Five shots, one thundering blast, he directed at the corner, then rolled over. Britten, his form bulking shadowy in the gloom stood with his feet planted emptying his guns into the table top which boomed like a drum.

"Hold it!" Hibbing yelled. "I quit! Hold it!"

The room was suddenly silent, but Black Jack was frantically loading his guns.

"Are you hurt, Nancy?" Britten asked.

As his last word died, Hibbing, treacherous to the last, opened up at the unmistakeable target of his voice.

Black Jack on his knees, took up the echo of the foreman's first shot. He was shooting high, fast and he stopped when Hibbing screamed.

Silence again, and they heard the soft thud of a body falling.

"Get you, Britten?"

"No. Nancy, are you all right?"

There was no answer!

Britten, cursing wildly, struck a match and ran to the bunk, kicking Hibbing out of the way. Black Jack was a step behind him. The girl was gagged.

"Thank God," Britten murmured, and while Black Jack lighted a candle stub on the table, Britten cut Nancy's bonds and removed the gag.

Suddenly, a single, sharp shot sounded from outside in the dusk.

Britten looked at Black Jack. "The sheriff. We can hold him off."

Black Jack stood erect, blood blotting the shoulder of his coat, his face white and weary. He looked at Nancy for a long time, then let his guns clatter to the floor.

"No. I'll give up."

Britten went to the door and called the sheriff. In a few seconds, Black Jack knew, he would be taken away—maybe lynched. So he looked at her, unashamed, his eyes quiet and grave and hungry, his face sombre.

And the girl understood. Her eyes held his for five long seconds, then she looked away, hiding something which Black Jack hoped was not pity.

THE sheriff entered, the posse swarming in behind him. He was a thin man, slow-moving and shrewd looking. He glanced at Black Jack.

"I never seen it fail," he said dryly. "Every crooked gambler I ever seen gets caught on the long shot."

Black Jack nodded wearily, trying to keep his knees from buckling.

"You're going to take him?" Nancy asked quietly.

The sheriff did not answer immediately. He strode over and looked at Horner. The saloon owner was propped against the wall where he had fallen. He was dead, his eyes open, a mild look of surprise on his face. Matson lay sprawled on his face, dead too.

Hibbing was alive, on his back, staring silently at the group of men.

Then the sheriff looked at Nancy. "Arrest him? Yes. He killed a man."

"But he saved me. Can't you see that?"

"The law don't work that way, ma'am," the sheriff said, shaking his head. "One right don't make up for a lot of wrongs."

"I'll go," Black Jack said quietly. "Never mind."

"You won't go," Britten said flatly. He turned to the sheriff. "Binney killed Gilmore in self-defense, after Gilmore had shot at him. You have my word for it, the only witness."

"So you've got your memory back?" the sheriff observed dryly. "I thought you was drunk."

Britten looked fleetingly at Black Jack, then nodded. "Yeah. I've got it back. And a lot more you'd like to hear too, sheriff." He held the sheriff's glance steadily. "I wasn't drunk. I haven't been drunk since the night dad was killed."

"You've made a danged good pass at it then, son."

"I've been pretendin'. Horner, Gilmore and Matson have been blackmailing me. They aimed to get every cent I had. I couldn't hand it over to them in a lump sum, or folks would know it looked funny. So they planned it out that I was supposed to play drunk and lose the money to them in little pieces at poker.

"Then Binney came in to work at the Mountain Rose." He indicated Black Jack. "He sat in on the game and was cagey enough to see I was losin' on purpose. So after the game, he went outside with me and confessed that he'd played a crooked game, gave me my money back, and told me he'd help me. We were talkin' in that alley. Gilmore and Matson were waitin' there to stop me and get their money back and they overheard Binney. They knew their game was spoiled if Binney talked, so they tried to kill him. He got Gilmore instead."

Hibbing, lying on the floor, groaned. The sheriff picked him up, laid him on the table and gave him a drink of water, but it was hopeless. He was a dying man. The sheriff watched him a moment, then turned to Britten.

"Why were they blackmailin' you? What did they have on you?"

Britten drew a deep breath and looked at his sister. Then he faced the sheriff squarely.

"I killed my father."

Nancy cried out: "Chuck! You didn't! It's not true!"

THE sheriff said nothing and Britten continued doggedly, dully.

"Before dad was killed, I'd turned wild. Drunk all the time and gamblin'. Well, I got into debt to Horner and Gilmore and Matson so deep I had to give I. O. U's. Dad, when he found out, wouldn't pay them. Then one night, the three of them called dad and me up to Wolf canyon to have a parley with them. I was mighty drunk, and scared. Dad told them he'd see them in hell before he'd pay

them a cent of my gamblin' debts. Besides bein' drunk, I was mad, too, and I threatened to beat dad up. He told me I could go to hell too, that he was through with me."

Britten wiped the sweat from his face.

"After dad left for home, I sat around the fire and drank some more. I got mighty drunk, and don't remember much, except bein' mad at dad. I rode off home. Next day when I was sober, I heard about the murder. Horner, Gilmore and Matson told me what had happened. Out at the parley, after dad had gone, I'd started drinkin' and swore I was goin' to kill him. They heard me and tried to stop me, but I broke away from 'em after takin' a carbine from Horner's saddle boot. They said—well, they said I killed him. And I reckon I did. I was mad enough."

"But you don't remember it?" the sheriff said.

"Not even leavin' their camp."

"Then how do you know you did it?" Black Jack asked. "How do you know they didn't lie? You've only got their word. Why did you believe them?"

"Because I was mad enough and drunk enough to do it."

Black Jack smiled weakly and turned to the table where Hibbing was lying. "Can you talk, man?" he asked Hibbing.

Hibbing nodded weakly.

"I heard you say Horner hired you before—in September. He paid you a thousand for the job—Was it to kill Chuck Britten's father?"

Hibbing's face was gray, his eyes glazed, but again he nodded weakly.

"Me and Reilly killed him for Horner, so's them three could blackmail Chuck. Killed him with a rifle." Then he shut his eyes, as if to go to sleep.

Britten listened, stunned. Nancy's sharp, glad cry brought him to his senses and she was in his arms, sobbing wildly.

The sheriff turned to Black Jack, who was leaning weakly against the table. "We'll go," he said quietly. "You're all right, Binney, and if I can ever help you, let me know."

"Binney's not the name," Black Jack muttered, trying to smile. "Just Black Jack. That fits me. Black Jack White."

But the sheriff pretended not to hear. Black Jack, dazed and weak, saw the posse file out. Britten and Nancy stood before him arm in arm, their faces radiant. Black Jack fought to keep the room from whirling around on top of him, fought to see Nancy's face.

"I—I better go," he heard himself say. "While there's still people left to cheat, I—I can make a livin'." It was his last gesture, his last ante, before he lost the biggest stake of his life.

He fought to make sense of things when he heard from afar a girl's voice saying:

"Black Jack! Black Jack! Please don't die. Wake up! Wake up! Oh, please!" Then he heard some directions about hot water and a fire, heard a man's voice call the sheriff.

Then he felt soft lips on his, heard the same woman's voice. "I've found you! I'll never let you go! Never!

And strangely, Black Jack knew everything had come out all right. He had won his biggest hand. . . .

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH!
A Powerful Novelette by
WALT COBURN
Famous Cowboy Author!

STAGECOACH PIONEER

Marauding Indians and trail wolves, hired gunmen of rival companies, could not keep young Jim Carlyon from pushing his stage lines ever westward. For he was following a dream far bigger than the selfish desire to operate the most coaches in the West. He was opening the wilderness for the pioneer and settler—risking his all for those millions who would follow. . . .

THE BRAKES of the big Concord —one of the Carlyon Transportation Company coaches—jammed on with a snarling protest. Curses came from the driver's throat in a fluid, molten stream as he fought the six plunging mules. The coach was two days westward from Fort Laramie, in a perilous strip of country where a stop could mean anything. The half dozen passengers

Gripping Novelette of the Last Frontier

by Robert E. Mahaffay

(Author of The Deacon Bottle Stories, etc.)

looked up, annoyed. But Jim Carlyon didn't care. Oblivious to the delay he remained immersed in bitter reflections, wedged in a corner of the jolting vehicle.

He had failed; his last desperate attempt to salvage the Carlyon Transportation Company had come to nothing. Three years of the sternest effort were blasted. In Washington they had given him his answer bluntly. The mail contract was already let, and it could not be changed, nor any part of it sliced off for the Carlyons. Ben Holliday had gotten the contract, and the mail would run over the more southerly route from Julesburg through Denver. It was too late to change it in any way.

But more than Jim Carlyon hated the thought of failure he dreaded the time when he must tell his father. Ab Carlyon had pioneered transcontinental transportation with the Wells Butterfield people

in the Southwest. Love of that hard game had dominated his life, and he had bred it into his son. The last of a fortune had gone into the Carlyon Transportation Company, and now that was to be wiped out.

Jim knew that he could survive and turn his hand to a new venture. But Ab Carlyon was making his last play in a life fraught with disappointment. And now Ab Carlyon was waiting for him at Pacific Springs, waiting to be told that the mail contract had been secured, and that the Carlyons need not go under for lack of it. . . .

The excited gasping of one of the passengers who was struggling to free his revolver roused Jim Carlyon at last. Plunging hoofs told him that the mules had slowed to a tempestuous walk. The driver was still swearing, punctuating his oaths with bellowed commands. A thick sheath of dust boiled around the coach.

Jim Carlyon thrust his head out of a window and shouted, "What's the trouble, Lige?"

The driver leaned down to bawl out his reply. "A stinkin' bull train hoggin' the upgrade. Won't stop an' won't shove over."

The hard-bitten army sergeant who had drawn his gun snorted as he stowed away the pistol. "Hell, nothin' but a damn bull train playing pony express."

Jim Carlyon frowned. He knew approximately where they were. On a long rise with the Platte on the right and rising shelves on the left. If the bull train boss chose to keep it there, the coach would trail in the dust at a slow walk for the remainder of the day. . . .

THE volume and heat of the driver's swearing mounted. Then a shot cracked sharply from the top of the coach. Recognizing it as only a more pointed request than words could convey, Jim Carlyon nevertheless leaped hastily out of the coach. Through the curling dust ahead he could see the long train of wagons crawling up the grade.

A horseman came piling through the swirling curtain. Dust lay thickly on his clothes and on his dark, lantern-jawed face. He jerked his mount in savagely. "Who fired that shot?"

"I did," snapped the guard. "Quit blockin' the road. Pull over to the side an' let us by."

"Go to hell," the lantern-jawed man snarled. "My time's worth as much as yours. You ain't carryin' mail!"

Anger leaped swiftly into Jim Carlyon's brain, but his words were drowned in the flood of vituperation from the driver. The horseman's dark face grew stormy. Jim Carlyon jumped. He caught the horseman's gun-wrist as it came up.

The lantern-jawed rider strove to wrench his hand free. Failing in that, he swung a blow with his left fist and then kicked free of the stirrups, lunging down. The gun dropped to the ground. Carlyon booted it away, set himself for the furious attack. He swung a pile-driving fist for the lantern jaw as it came at him. It landed, but the impetuous charge bowled him over. The other was on him like a flash, a knee battering for his groin, thumbs gouging for eyeballs. Gripped by cold anger, Jim Carlyon rolled free, whirled as the bull train boss came at him again. On guard this time, he stopped the rush, and they stood slugging on spread feet. The bull train captain was a head shorter than Carlyon, but more burly. Twice he went down and rose again to wade into the battering onslaught of Carlyon's fists. The third time he lay sprawled where he had fallen.

One of his own bull-whackers, who had rushed back to see the fight, helped him onto his horse. His face was a bloody smear and his nose was broken. "Slayt's

my name," he blurted hoarsely. "You'll hear more of this."

"Carlyon's mine. Look me up in Pacific Springs if you feel it ain't finished."

Then they had gone. Lige Beeler, the driver, shifted the cud of tobacco in his ancient cheeks. "Saved me a bullet hole, I reckon, Jim," he said. "Thanks."

And, ahead of them the bull train pulled over and stopped. The coach crawled past it along the ledge overhanging the river.

JIM CARLYON left the stage at Fort Casper. Company business there held him up for three days. A week later he rode into the stockade at Pacific Springs. He caught a flutter of blue gingham inside the trading store, and there he went. The slow drift of his pony's hoofs drew a girl to the doorway and then out to meet him. Her dress was worn and faded, but there was a quick strength about her movements; there was sparkle and life in the light mass of her yellow hair, rich as South Pass gold. There was not so much beauty about her as a dignity and generous warmth.

Jim Carlyon took one of her hands in his. "Back, Lynn," he said, his eyes running hungrily over the soft planes of her face. "Been a long time, too long. Honey—you're crying!"

Lynn Dawson was staring up at him desperately through tear-dimmed eyes, her gaze touching softly the lean, almost gaunt, surface of his cheeks, the straight mouth which had turned grim since she had last seen it.

"Jim," she said, "dad's leaving here. I've got to go with him."

"What for?" he asked her quietly.

"He says there isn't business here any more. He's going to Bowdwin, on the new mail route."

"Some are leavin', but not everybody," said Jim Carlyon; then a softer note came into his voice. "We've waited long enough now, Lynn. . . . Stay here with me."

The girl shook her head, trying to stifle the sobs which rose in her. "I—I can't, Jim. Not until dad lets me. He says—oh, Jim, I don't care whether you have anything or not!"

"So that's the way of it," said Jim Carlyon slowly.

"He said you Carlyons would be smashed, Jim," she hurried on desperately, "that no stage line in this country could break even without the mail. Jim, it isn't so!"

"I reckon it is." Jim Carlyon squared the breadth of his shoulders and looked past the girl toward the stage building where Ab would be waiting for him. "The Carlyons are through. We should have had part of that mail contract, but we didn't get it" He was thinking of his father now, while he talked to the girl in jerks, between his teeth. "It'll take me a while—to get on my feet—doin' something else. When I do, Lynn—"

"I'll wait, Jim dear," she whispered. "I don't care how long it is. I'll wait."

"The time'll be as short as I can make it," he told her huskily. Her hand was still in his, and he let it go regretfully. "We'll talk more later," he said. "Right now I've got to see Ab. Tell him that—"

"Jim," the girl broke in swiftly, "there's something else. Last night Ab was hurt—shot!"

Jim Carlyon cut back to her abruptly. There was smouldering fire in his gray eyes. "Not dead?" he snapped.

"No. He's—he's still alive, Jim."

"Who did it?"

"A man named Slayt. He rode in yesterday. He drank all afternoon, and after dark he shouted that your father had dared him to a finish fight. Slayt was so drunk he could hardly stay on his feet, but he forced Ab to fight and then shot him."

Jim Carlyon's face went bleak and stony as he listened. "It was me Slayt was lookin' for," he said. "I met him with a bull train on the trail. He must have left it an' come on ahead."

"What are you going to tell Ab, Jim?"

"I don't know," said Jim Carlyon.

HE STALKED heavily across the open to the stage company building. The stout and bald-headed troop doctor met him on the steps.

"How bad, Doc?" he asked.

The surgeon shook his head. "Bad, if you want the truth of it. He's alive, and he may live. But it will be months before he has any strength, and he may never walk again. He's paralyzed from the hips down." The doctor, who knew the transportation set-up on the Overland trail as well as the next man, examined the other shrewdly. "Be careful what you say to him," he added. "At best, he's on the ragged edge."

Jim Carlyon went through into the office and stopped before the desk where he had expected to find his father. No one was behind it now, but in his mind Jim Carlyon saw the man who should have been there—Ab Carlyon who, with the dream of transcontinental transportation driving him on, had sunk most of his money in the Wells Butterfield Company and their Southwestern route. He had lost out when the mail contract had been transferred to Russel, Majors & Waddel, operating in the North through South Pass. He had trekked north then, formed the Carlyon Transportation Company, fought for part of the route and the mail contract. The Pony Express venture had broken Russel, Majors & Waddel; they had sold out to Ben Holliday. Now Holliday, so to speak, was kicking the old Overland trail out from under the Carlyons by routing the mail through Denver. The last of Ab Carlyon's ill-fated moves was made, and he had lost!

Grim lines grew around Jim Carlyon's eyes, around his mouth. Could he tell his father that the Carlyons were smashed? He knew what that would do to Ab Carlyon.

He went in to the living quarters behind the office, knelt down by the bunk on which Ab lay. There was the same stubborn ruggedness about Ab Carlyon's features that there was about his son's. His hair was gray and thin, but there was power still in his glance. The grip of his hand, though, was the grip of a man whose hold on life is all but gone.

"How'd you make out, son?"

And looking into those strong gray eyes which were like his own, Jim Carlyon strove to keep his voice from shaking. He couldn't bring himself to blurt out the harsh truth. "We'll—we'll get the mail, dad," he lied. "Our share of it anyhow. It'll be a while 'fore the details get smoothed out. Meantime, we'll hang an' rattle."

A bright light came into the old man's face. Weakly jubilant, he croaked, "I knew it'd come, boy. We'll show 'em the Carlyons don't whip easy."

Jim Carlyon stood up and wiped a forearm over his damp forehead. "There'll be some changes—while we're waitin'," he said hoarsely. "We'll make a play for express business, an' go to freightin' on the side. Between here an' Laramie we'll pick up every dollar that ain't nailed down. We'll make it—you an' me."

CHAPTER TWO

Failure and Fight!

TWELVE months later Ab Carlyon was still in his bunk, and Jim Carlyon was still working fiendishly to make the Carlyon Company pay—without the mail.

At the outset he had converted half of the company's stage-coaches into cash, and that cash into freight wagons. There was freight to be had—troop supplies, winter feed for the stock kept at the forts, traders' goods—and he fought for his share of it. His express business boomed because he guaranteed his shipments against road hazards. He made it good by sending heavily armed convoys with each cargo of value. It was costly, but it gave the name Carlyon weight in the express field—and it kept the Carlyon stages rolling on schedule.

But desperate as the stand was, it was also hopeless, and Jim Carlyon knew it. The cost was heart-breaking. Raiding Indians wiped out stage stations, captured and burned or made off with freight cargoes. The sheer manpower required to keep the road open sucked up the profits, drained away borrowed capital. The end was inevtiable. Jim Carlyon ignored it and fought on.

He saw Lynn Dawson but twice during that year. It was a long ride to Bowdwin, and Jim Carlyon had time for nothing but work. Little sleep and incessant work had gaunted his husky frame, brought out the straight, hard stubbornness in his mouth.

During the early part of those twelve months the thought which lay heavily and bitterly at the back of his mind was of the man Slayt. But when he told Ab what he intended to do, the old man shook his head.

"He was drunk when he done it, son. A shoot-out with him now would only make things worse."

Worn down, irritable, Jim Carlyon burst out, "He's buckin' us at every step. I aim to stop it! He went to Laramie, turned in his own version of the fight he had with you, an' got cleared of it. Holliday took him on, an' he's runnin' the division west of Denver. That means it's a fight between him an' us for every scrap of freight that's hauled. He figgers to break us an' make his rep at the same time!"

There was more behind the turbulent flow of Jim Carlyon's words, more that he could not tell Ab. Slayt had backed Tom Dawson's trading venture in Bowdwin; as a result, the trader was urging Lynn to accept his, Slayt's, offer of marriage.

"What one man thinks or does don't matter, son," Ab Carlyon said. "It's transportation that counts. That's the big thing. Somebody's got to open this country up an' keep it open. It's the transportation men that'll do it! The money we'll make ain't important; neither is the name Carlyon. It's the work we're doin' that'll last! Get that in your blood, boy. Get it runnin' through you like fire!"

"Easy, dad, easy," muttered Jim Carlyon.

The old man lay back, his lips white and trembling. "You've got a job to do, Jim," he whispered. "I wish to God I could help you with it. One man or a dozen ain't important, stacked up alongside that job. Don't let nothin' keep you from it!"

Something of that hard and relentless love for an ideal caught hold in Jim Carlyon. Though it tore him cruelly, he said, "Nothin' will, dad. . . ."

TOWARD the end of that year two events broke simultaneously. Trappers brought word to the posts that a coalition was forming on the plains; the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Sioux were banding together, determined to make war. That information Jim Carlyon took in stride. The second event stirred a fierce exultation in him. The Government, hard-pressed by civil war, was forming companies of captured Confederate soldiers, was sending them to the

relief of the West. And the contract for hauling their supplies between Forts Laramie and Bridger was being let to the Carlyons!

It was like water to a man crisped by desert heat. It meant a fighting chance where none had existed before. The contract was a rich one and the Carlyons had got it in open bidding against other companies, among them Ben Holliday's. That in itself was a triumph.

When he told his father about it, Jim Carlyon couldn't keep the gladness out of his voice. "It's what we been waitin' for, dad. It'll put us on our feet. I'm leavin' now for Laramie. Papers to sign an' so on."

And old Ab, thinner, his hair whiter, croaked from his bunk, "That's talkin', son. It was plain hell puttin' the Southwest route through, but Wells Butterfield done it, an' I was with 'em. We'll do the same here, soon as I get on my feet. I know what you're goin' through, son."

But Ab Carlyon didn't know, Jim thought with a trace of bitterness as he left. Ab, it seemed, was withdrawing more and more from the present, fastening his mind on his vanished glories with the Wells Butterfield line.

WITH Lige Beeler tooling it, the stage rolled along the Sweetwater, past Devil's Gate, through Fort Casper. Twenty-five miles beyond the fort, Beeler shouted down to Carlyon, and the coach lurched and swayed as he pulled in the mules. Guns bristled immediately inside the stage.

Lige Beeler was bellowing, "What's wanted, boys? There's a bead drawed on yore bellies, so step careful."

"You got us wrong," a voice complained. "We want a ride to Laramie. We been doin' a little prospectin' an' the Injuns got our ponies. We got gold to pay."

There were two of them, and they climbed into the stage. Both were hard-bitten, shifty-eyed. The heavier of the pair revealed missing teeth when he talked. His pardner was wiry and short. Jim Carlyon gave them a short inspection, pegged them for what they were, and dismissed them. Renegades from the California mines and hardcases from points east were common along the Overland.

For their part, the two men appeared to ignore Carlyon and the two other passengers. They slouched on the seat across from him, coat collars turned up against the penetrating cold, for it was October.

Half an hour after they had boarded the stage, the man with the missing teeth swore and said loudly, "I'm plumb out of chawin', Harry. If yore plug's handy, let's borry it."

The wiry man addressed as Harry fumbled in the pocket of his heavy coat. But instead of the tobacco he drew out a revolver. There was a click as he cocked it, and Jim Carlyon found himself staring into the black muzzle.

Eyes narrowed, Carlyon snapped, "Stick-up, is it?"

The toothless man grinned. "Not exactly. Don't nobody move, an' don't talk." He too produced a revolver. "Get the hardware, Harry," he directed. "Don't take no chances, you gents. This gun of mine goes off in a hell of a hurry."

Fuming but helpless, Jim Carlyon allowed himself to be relieved of his gun. He watched stolidly while the other passengers were stripped of theirs.

The toothless man's eyes roved like a cat's over the coach's interior. His voice grew thin. "Put 'em under my feet, Harry. That's it. Now the driver an' guard."

The wiry Harry released the catch of the door, groped for the rail along the top and swung himself out by his left hand, his right gripping the pistol. His

grating tones fled back into the coach. "Hold steady, guard, or I'll blow your head off. Don't turn around. Pitch the gun overboard. . . . Pitch it overboard, damn you!" The gun clattered into the trail. "All right, driver, pull 'em in."

The stage rumbled to a stop. "Pile out, gents," ordered the toothless man. "One at a time, an' move slow."

The two bandits went to work with swift precision. Harry cut loose the mules, and a shot which raked the rump of the off-wheeler sent them racing in panic down the road. Then, under the toothless man's guardian guns, he went expertly through the pockets of the stranded company. That accomplished, the toothless bandit slivered off kindling wood with his jackknife, piling it on the floor of the coach. He ripped down the canvas blinds, tossed them on the heap.

With a cold, reckless fury ruling him, Jim Carlyon took a half step toward him, measuring the distance for a leap. Lige Beeler caught his arm. "Steady, kid. He'll plug you."

The toothless man looked over his shoulder. His eyes were hard and glittering. "Stand where you are," he jerked.

"What's the good of burning the coach?" blazed Jim Carlyon. "Leave it alone!"

"You ain't decidin' what's good an' what ain't, mister."

A sulphur match flared; the heap of tinder caught. Jim Carlyon, helpless wrath searing him, watched the flames leap up, swirl and spread until the stagecoach was a crackling torch.

The toothless bandit backed away. Followed by his companion, he scrambled up the bank on the left of the trail. When they had retreated beyond their short guns' range of effectiveness they broke at a run for a willow thicket along the river.

"Ten to one they got broncs there," exploded the ancient Beeler. "Jim—"

But Jim Carlyon was racing back along the trail. Fifty or a hundred yards back there was the guard's rifle which had gone overboard. Jim Carlyon got to it as the two bandits burst out of the thicket, spurring horses north. He knelt down there in the trail, drew his bead carefully and surely.

The rifle spat sharply. The short bandit twisted convulsively, snatched for the saddle horn, missed it and pitched down. His foot caught in the heavy box stirrup, and he dragged from it, bumping over the uneven ground. The toothless man started to circle back, changed his mind, spurred into the river and across it.

Jim Carlyon was the first to reach the man called Harry. The bandit, his chest crushed by a flailing hoof, was dying. But though death was close and he knew it, there was a certain grim humor in him. "Too bad I wasn't—totin' the bullion," he panted.

Jim Carlyon eased him into a more comfortable position. He said softly, "Why'd you burn the stage, feller?"

The bandit coughed blood. When the spasm was gone he said, "Got paid—"

"Who paid you?"

"Reckon it don't—matter now. Gent name of Slayt paid us. He hates two fellers—named Carlyon, like hell. Claims they're cuttin' into his business. Figgers to break 'em—if he can."

Lige Beeler and the others came up then. "The other one'll be half way to Montana 'fore we can tail him," Beeler snorted.

Jim Carlyon shrugged. "Let him go. I'm takin' the bronc an' going on to Laramie. Do what you can for this man, Lige. Then hit back for Casper an' pick up the next stage that comes through. Take the guns. With the bronc, I won't need 'em."

It was late afternoon on the following day when he rode into Fort Laramie. He stabled the horse and turned toward the troop headquarters building.

A fat, pouchy-eyed man was leaning over the colonel's desk, talking vehemently: "If you don't know why Slayt didn't get that contract, who does? Damnedest piece of foolishness the Army's ever been guilty of. The Carlyons aren't equipped to handle it. You'll wind up in the middle of winter with your men starving. The Carlyons—"

Jim Carlyon stepped through the doorway. His gray eyes were smokily provocative. "The Carlyons will handle that contract, an' they'll do a job of it. Go back an' tell Slayt that—for me!"

CHAPTER THREE

Slayt Strikes for the Back

THERE were delays and official red-tape about the contract. After two weeks of impatient waiting in Fort Laramie, Jim Carlyon left in disgust for Pacific Springs. It would be weeks more before a wagon could be got to rolling.

When word come through at last that the supplies were ready to be moved, he was badly jammed and could not leave. Twenty miles west of Pacific Springs a party of marauding braves had cut off and was attacking a stage-coach bearing a valuable gold shipment. One of the guards had raced in with the alarm. The coach had managed to reach a swing station, and there it was besieged.

Jim Carlyon sent Lige Beeler to take charge of the wagon train at Fort Laramie, and himself rode westward at the head of a relief party.

After thirty-six sleepless hours he was back in Pacific Springs with the coach. As he turned his bronc wearily into the stage corral a match flared; the end of a cigarette made a dull, glowing spot in the dark.

"That you, Carlyon?" a voice challenged him softly.

"Yeah. Who are you?" He could make out the dim shape of the man.

"You wouldn't know my name. I worked for you a while back. I got something to tell you."

Impatiently Jim said, "All right. What is it?"

The stranger cleared his throat. "That wagon train of yours, from Laramie, ain't goin' to get through."

"What makes you think that?"

"I heard talk in Denver—talk I wasn't supposed to hear. A gent there is fixin' to break the contract you got. If you can't get stuff through, it'll be broke."

"Why run the risk by telling me?" Jim Carlyon asked bitterly. "What's back of this?"

"A job," the man said shortly. "If you Carlyons pull through, give me a berth with money in it."

"You'll get it, if there is one. Where'll they jump the wagons?"

"East of Devil's Gate someplace. I ain't sure just where."

Jim Carlyon turned away. His first impulse was of heavy, brooding anger. That anger faded, and in its place came a deepening of the grim resolve which had carried him this far in the unequal battle. Ab had instilled that hardy determination in him. With it he had bucked uncomplainingly the natural hazards of the trail. Now Jim Carlyon found himself turning Slayt into that category. One hazard more or less, one man more or less—didn't matter. Transportation was the thing. . . .

He took two hours of sleep that night. Then he hit the trail again, leading a spare mount. Lige Beeler would be pulling out of Laramie with the train. He could be intercepted before he reached Fort Casper. Ahead of Jim Carlyon lay two hun-

dred miles or better, through hostile territory. . . .

THE twisting tongues of flame from the roaring fire etched strange shadows on the high freight wagons. The same shadows played occasionally over the gaunt and bearded faces of the teamsters scattered on the ground away from the fire's direct radiance. Out in the dark, rifle clutched steadily in his horny hands, Lige Beeler called suddenly: "Who's there? Talk quick!"

Fifty yards away a voice answered him. "That you, Lige?"

"Jim! What in the name of hell—"

Staggering a little, on foot, Jim Carlyon stalked to the fire. In the red glare of the flames he looked to be in worse shape than he was. His coat and shirt half torn from him, his hat gone, dirt and mud streaking him, he might have been dragged through the sooty channels of hell. His gaze was bleak, his eyes bloodshot and hard. He had wound strips of his shirt around the upper part of his right arm.

Lige Beeler caught him as he stumbled down. "How bad, kid?" he muttered.

"Not much, Lige. 'Rapahoes—five of 'em—spotted me yesterday. Couldn't shake 'em off. Knocked over two; the rest got my broncs 'fore they cleared out. Sleep's what I'm needin', Lige. Put out a double guard. Slayt's got men out—aimin' to stop the freight."

It was past noon the next day, and the wagons were lurching slowly westward when Jim Carlyon crawled down from atop one of the loads. He sought out Lige Beeler, and told him what he had learned of the contemplated attack.

The old driver snorted. "They'll play hell doin' it now, Jim. We'll hold the mules close in an' meet 'em with slugs." He roamed with both hands through various pockets and produced a smudged and crinkled envelope. "They was a letter waitin' for you at Laramie. Whoever wrote it musta thought you'd be there to get the freight."

A slow flame warmed some of the sternness out of Jim Carlyon's gray eyes as he took it. He had seen Lynn Dawson's writing in her father's account books too many times to mistake it now.

But as he tore it open and read, that flame died. The words burned in his brain:

> Dearest Jim:
>
> Things have gone badly here for father. You and I must both forget the foolish things I said to you. But whatever I do, you must know that you are the only man I will ever love.
>
> Lynn.

She did not need to phrase it more clearly. The ugly fact that she had not been able to put it into words drove home in Jim Carlyon like the thrust of a knife. She was going to marry Slayt!

Worn down by years of relentless effort which were bringing him nothing, Jim Carlyon rose in rebellion then. The loss of Lynn Dawson was more than he could stand. Transportation, that demon god of his father's, had caused it. A bitter wave of resentment against the thing he had sacrificed so much for gripped Jim Carlyon. If he had given up, if he had quit when he knew he was whipped, this would not have happened. Lynn Dawson would be his instead of Slayt's; some way could have been found. . . . He would go to her now, take her away with him somewhere, anywhere away from this fiendish place. To hell with—

Old Lige Beeler read the turmoil in the boy's face. In a rough attempt at solace, he ventured, "They's a new sawbones in Laramie, Jim. Come in with the Sixth Ohio Cavalry. Kind of a specialist in nerves an' paralyzed people an' such. I

told him about Ab—where the bullet was an' all—an' he said he reckoned he could have Ab walkin' around inside of a couple months. Worth tryin', eh?"

Though they had not been intended to, those words stirred something in Jim Carlyon. They brought up the picture of Ab Carlyon. Ab Carlyon lying on his bunk, his body shattered and helpless, but his devotion to the cause which had ruined him undimmed! And he heard his father saying again with a fierceness wrenched out of his heart: "One man or a dozen ain't important, stacked up alongside that job. Don't let nothin' keep you from it!"

The rebellion in Jim Carlyon rolled back. He knew that come what might, he would go on as best he could.

THE wagon train plodded sluggishly through Fort Casper, toiled along the Platte. It moved steadily but warily, primed for instant battle. Night or day saw no relaxing in the sharp vigilance, and consequently the strain of it bore down with increasing heaviness.

On the morning of the fourth day Beeler growled impatiently, "Kid, if they was goin' to jump us they'd have done it by now. Somethin's wrong."

Red-eyed and curt, Jim Carlyon said, "Looks like it, Lige. Nothin' to do now but wait an' see."

At noon one of the advance scouts came racing back at a dead run to the wagons. Leaning over the foam-soaked withers of his mount, he shouted, "The station ahead's nothin' but ashes. The tender's still shootin', but there's a pack of redskins hustlin' him."

The rescue party formed quickly, surged at a gallop for the station. Half a dozen whooping Indians, naked to the waist in spite of the cold, were circling the charred remains of the station. From a depression in the prairie fifty yards from the heap of ashes, a lone rifle was barking intermittently. The train guards charged in a body, rifles spitting lead, and the outnumbered savages whirled away and sped for the hills.

Jim Carlyon cut away from the pursuing rescuers, rode to the pit where the stock-tender lay. "The Injuns done it?" he demanded as he worked over the man's wounds.

The stock-tender shook his head feebly. "Not Injuns. They stumbled onto me this mornin'. Whites done it—day before yestidday. Torched the station an' run off all the horses an' mules. Tried to kill me an' thought they had."

Jim Carlyon stared on along the trail in the direction of Pacific Springs. The suspicion, already rooted, took hold solidly in him now that Slayt had outwitted him. An attack on the wagon train had never been contemplated. But the threat of it had been successfully used to draw him away.

The wagon train crawled on, and there unrolled before it fresh scenes of ruthless depredation, fresh disaster. Along a fifty mile strip of the trail the Carlyon stations had been burned out, the stock run off. Better than three hundred horses and mules were missing. The stroke had been a bold and deadly one, long planned apparently, for it could have been accomplished only with inside help. Slayt's men had hired out to the Carlyons, or Carlyon men had been bribed. It had been intended, no doubt, as the last staggering assault the broken Carlyons could endure. It was very nearly that.

"So what, kid?" demanded Lige Beeler.

Jim Carlyon's gray eyes dulled. "Get the stock back first, Lige. I'll trail 'em to hell an' yonder if I have to."

"Jim, there ain't one chance in a hundred of gettin' 'em."

Jim Carlyon laughed hoarsely. "We ain't had even odds since we started this

line, Lige. What's the sense in cryin' for 'em now?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Through Hell to Breakfast

THE gray-haired troop commander at Pacific Springs frowned regretfully. "I realize what it means to you, Carlyon. God knows, I'd give you a company if I could. I'm sorry. We haven't men enough as it is, and my orders are to protect the settlements, keep the trail open and the telegraph line free. Strictly that, and nothing else."

Jim Carlyon got to his feet slowly. "All right, Carse. I'll go without 'em."

The Major ran a hand wearily through his rumpled hair. "Damn it, Carlyon, I'd advise strongly against it. Every brave between Kearney and Salt Lake is in war paint. The tribes are going hog-wild. Stay here, Carlyon. I mean it!"

"Stay here an' watch the Carlyon Company rot under me?" asked Jim bitterly. "No thanks."

As he reached the door, the Major called after him, "You've talked to Ab, of course?"

"No."

"You'd better. Something's in the wind. I don't know what. He's anxious as hell to see you."

Jim Carlyon went outside. Ab, probably, had heard of the surgeon at Laramie who could cure his paralysis. But that would have to wait now. Jim Carlyon knew that he couldn't face those probing gray eyes of his father and tell him that there was no hope at all any more. Lige Beeler had said the odds were a hundred to one. But with the country alive with Indians on the warpath they were even greater than that. Jim Carlyon elected to follow through with the odds against him because that was what he had always done.

So he did not see Ab, and he rode out of Pacific Springs at dawn with fifteen men at his heels. They were picked men, Carlyon men who could be depended upon.

They rode hard that first day, using remounts and striking south and east from Pacific Springs. There were only two destinations at which the raiders might hope to dispose of their four-footed loot —the Mormon colony at Salt Lake, or Denver. Toward evening on the second day, with the gloomy scarps of the Medicine Bow mountains looming before them, they hit the trail they were looking for.

Lige Beeler spat reflectively as he studied the sign. "You can't push three hundred hosses an' mules without them shoutin' which way they're goin'," he advised. "We've made damn good time, an' they ain't. They're a day, maybe two, ahead of us. High-tailin' south, which p'ints to Denver. I'd have swore, personal, that we wouldn't get this far."

A hard, straining eagerness was beginning to pump through Jim Carlyon's veins. The swift pace of the chase had keyed him for battle; now, with all that hinged on it, that battle seemed imminent.

He grinned at Lige Beeler. It was cold and humorless, but it was a grin. "Change those odds of yours a little, will you, Lige?"

The old man squinted at the sky before he answered. "I kind of think not, Jim," he countered quietly. "We ain't seen hide ner hair of an Injun, but that don't signify there ain't none. More'n that, we'll have snow 'fore mornin', which ain't goin' to help any."

The snow came during the night, a filmy sifting flood of it. Having charted the probable course of the stolen herd ahead of them, they pressed on. There was still an excellent possibility that in

the mountains the raiders would slip away and elude pursuit.

A break came then, the first one which had come to Jim Carlyon. The fall of snow, which had seemed a light one, increased steadily. Like a tortured thing the wind screamed from the peaks, and by nightfall of that day a blizzard was howling down through the Rockies.

Lige Beeler chortled grimly as he pointed to the mounting drifts. "They'll play hell shovin' the herd far through them, Jim. We'll hang tough here, same as they'll be doin'. When it's over we'll move in on 'em."

For two more days the storm held them prisoner. Then the wind slackened, the whipping snow particles thinned to a repentant drizzle. Impatient and tense, Jim Carlyon got under way again. There was no sign to follow now. But in some valley or ravine in the mountains ahead, within the day's run, would be the raiders and the herd. He threw outriders to either side, and they set out to run a comb through the tangled mass of the hills.

Though not more than half a dozen miles had been covered, it was midafternoon when the signal came abruptly—the spurting detonation of a rifle from somewhere ahead in the thinly falling snow veil. It meant that they had overtaken a rear guard. The short range of vision made it impossible for him to be more than fifty yards distant. Jim Carlyon roared a command. Spurs rammed home in ponies jaded and leg-weary from floundering through drifts.

JIM CARLYON left his rifle in its scabbard, jerked his pistol. He could hear the slogging crunch of hoofs as Lige Beeler plunged to his stirrup. They hit a rise and the ragged outline of a low ridge came into sight. The rifle ahead of him snarled again. This time he saw the momentary dart of flame, and behind it the head and shoulders of a man. He leveled his gun, triggered.

They scrambled over the crest of the ridge, past the sprawled figure in the snow. Guns were chopping out angry barks to his right. He reined in that direction, cursing the pall of snow which was making the fight something obscure and impalpable, as if it were a dream.

At his elbow Lige Beeler was growling threats as they plowed down the slope. A dark mass took shape indistinctly, flickering behind the curtain of dripping flakes. Then slashes of gun flame were hissing through the white.

A horse and rider came buck-jumping wildly toward Jim Carlyon. The rider was staring over his shoulder. When he brought his head around he showed a black beard hemming in glaring eyes. He shouted and his gun snapped up. His mouth hard, Jim Carlyon fired again, and the rider toppled off into the snow.

Sharp gun bursts still studded the brooding quiet inspired by the snow blanket. A sense of colossal irritation that he could not see the fight as a whole swept over Jim Carlyon. It was like groping in a dark room. He spurred ahead. Lige Beeler forced his mount alongside. "Easy, kid," he shouted. "It's about over. We'll be pluggin' our own men."

The shooting dwindled, fell away entirely. Figures, calling out "Carlyon" lest their identity be mistaken, came humping through the snow. A hasty check was made. Three of the fifteen men Jim Carlyon had brought with him were dead. A few others were wounded.

Four of the raiders, pocketed under a shelf of rock, had thrown down their guns and surrendered. The others, five of them, had gone down before the blazing guns of the Carlyon men.

Lige Beeler came stumping back from a survey of the dead. Jim said steadily, "Was Slayt one of 'em, Lige?"

The old man shook his head. "Nope. Couldn't expect it anyhow. You got Blackie Davis, though, which is somethin'. Blackie handles most of Slayt's crooked stuff."

"Then this don't pin anything on Slayt," said Jim Carlyon.

That the net had not been tight enough to catch Slayt was the only bitter part of the deal. Except for that, the taste of victory was warm and keen in the mouth of Jim Carlyon. Out of hopeless defeat had come a fighting chance again. Slayt had played his trump card and it had not won. In five or six days the stock would be back on the road again, and the freight would be rolling.

THE blazing shafts of their night fire were spearing high into a cloud of pink flakes when Lige Beeler slithered to his feet and cocked an ear at the outer darkness. "Hossbacker comin', Jim," he advised. "What in hell he's doin' way off—"

Jim Carlyon caught it too. The stumbling crunch of a winded pony hard pressed by the drifts. The rider came up close, and the fire lit up gaunt cheeks, a stubble of wiry hair along jaws and chin.

"Blackie!" he demanded hoarsely. "Where's Blackie? Tell him Clint Loan's here!"

Jim Carlyon stepped to him, and a gun barrel went up and into the stranger's ribs. "Blackie Davis checked out, mister. What was you wantin' to see him about?" He recognized the man's voice; he had heard it before that night by the corrals at Pacific Springs.

"Slayt says—" began the man. Then his teeth snapped. His hurry and anxiety drained out of him as he sensed the situation.

"Sure," Jim Carlyon ripped at him. "Slayt sent you. What for?"

"He needs help, that's why." The man gave him a surly stare. "You're Carlyon, ain't you? Well, there ain't a wheel rollin' on the Overland west of Julesburg. The whole damn country's lousy with Injuns. Slayt's in Bowdwin with all the Holliday rollin' stock he could get his hands on. So are about twenty-five other folks, includin' women an' kids. There's about five hundred Injuns got 'em corralled there. Slayt figgered the place'd be safe, but it ain't."

"Slayt knowin' right where he could pick up about nine good men, eh?" amended Jim Carlyon sarcastically.

The man remained sullenly silent.

Jim stepped back, but did not remove the threat of his gun. "Take him away, Lige," he said coldly. "Put him with the others."

Minutes later Lige Beeler came back, squatted on his heels by Jim Carlyon. "Well, Jim, it's one way or the other. Which'll it be?"

It was a long time before Jim Carlyon answered. Now, with victory within his grasp, came a demand that he relinquish it. For the victory would be worthless if he went on to Bowdwin. He would be forced to leave the stock he had pursued and fought for—the stock which was the margin of life or death to the Carlyon Company. Marauding braves would be bound to pick up the herd and flee the country with it. But he must go to Bowdwin; he knew that.

It wasn't because of Slayt. And it wasn't because of Lynn Dawson. There were other people in the settlement, women and children among them, whose lives might depend on the action he took. Including the captured raiders, he could muster eighteen men—if he abandoned the stock. The safety or destruction of Bowdwin, with its consequent slaughter, might rest on those men.

"We'll ride to Bowdwin," said Jim Carlyon, "startin' now."

A DAY and a half later a flying column of men whirled out of the wooded slopes to the west of Bowdwin. Aided by the snow, they streaked like the darting tongue of a snake through a gap in the encircling Indian lines, roared in a fury of hoof thunder to the gates of the settlement. Trade guns popped futilely. A flurry of arrows fell short.

A confusion of shouts broke loose as they poured into the stockade. Men stationed at loopholes around the enclosure pulled off their hats and yelled. Tears were staining the cheeks of women who ran out among the milling hordes.

Jim Carlyon's glance ran with a certain hard appraisal over the little body of defenders. Theirs was the enthusiasm of desperation. And as the rustle of shouts and acclaim died slowly he recognized that even the arrival of help had not assured them of safety. A tense and quiet sternness replaced the enthusiasm, and he knew that he had ridden into a settlement convinced that it was doomed. Jim Carlyon's jaw grew stony, and he tried not to think of the herd he had left or of what he would say to Ab if he lived to see him again.

As he swung down from the saddle a burly figure pushed through the jam to him. Slayt's dark, lantern-jawed face was expressionless. "Your men, Carlyon?"

"Some of 'em," said Jim Carlyon coolly. "The others figgered they'd rather fight than hang."

For a moment each challenged the other with his glance. Each of them knew what was passing in the other's thoughts.

Slayt shrugged. "Any man with a gun is a good man now." Then a gnawing fear showed through from the bleak depths of his eyes. "The main thing is to get out of this bloody hole we're in."

"Hell, Slayt, put even a rat in a corner an' he'll fight."

"What do you think we been doin'?"

Jim nodded toward the score or more Holliday freight wagons and coaches cluttering the yard. "To hell with your rolling stock, eh?"

Without answering, Jim Carlyon turned away. Fate had given a diabolical twist to a circumstance already galling enough. He had smashed the Carlyon Company to protect Holliday rolling stock. If it was saved, Slayt would get the credit for guarding valuable property.

Naturally and inevitably Jim Carlyon took command of the little force. He checked the stockade's suitability for defense, posted a regular guard and divided the defenders into shifts.

When that was done he turned to what his mind dreaded, and to what he had been avoiding. As he mounted the step of the trading store he knew that Lynn Dawson had been waiting for him.

"Jim," was all she said, but her tone had a stifled tenderness which put a throbbing lump in his throat.

While he tried to keep his own words casual, there was an unmistakable hunger in them. "It's good, seein' you again, Lynn."

"You got—the letter?"

"Yes, I got it."

A quavering voice interrupted them. Out of the store came Tom Dawson. He was an old man, a fringe of tawny hair clinging to his bald head. Thin, nervous, he stared at Jim Carlyon without recognition. "What's happening?" he demanded querulously of Lynn. "Slayt said we'd be safe here. He promised. Find Slayt for me, Lynn. I got to talk to him. Somethin' important."

"I will," the girl said, "I'll find him, dad. You go back inside and wait." She brushed by Jim Carlyon hurriedly. Her voice was choked as she whispered, "Dad's not well. He hasn't been. Come back, Jim—later."

THE night passed, and another day. During it the Indians attacked, sending wave after wave of howling warriors driving against the stockade. Through a furious, deadly hour Jim Carlyon fought at the main gate. When at last the assault had been stopped, five of the defenders were dead, many more of them wounded.

Tired out and hungry, Jim Carlyon sat that night with his back braced against the wheel of a wagon in the yard. Small fires cast up a flickering brilliance. The light burnished a figure in a dark cloak, moving toward him. He watched it casually at first, then the smooth grace of its movements brought him up sharply. It must be Lynn Dawson. It could be no one else.

A minute later she was beside him in the dark, whispering desperately. "Jim! Jim, I've got to tell you. Slayt—Slayt and two others are going to leave tonight."

"Leave?" he echoed.

"Yes. Slayt says there isn't a chance. He thinks they can get through the Indians in the dark."

Jim Carlyon's frame stiffened. "He can't do that!" he burst out hoarsely. "Every man's needed here. What about the rest of us?"

Lynn Dawson was hurrying on, her voice broken by sobs. "Dad heard Slayt talking it over, Jim. He wants to go with Slayt. He told me I had to go too, but I —I wouldn't. Jim, don't blame dad. He's sick. He doesn't know what he's doing."

Jim Carlyon said steadily, "Where do they plan to leave from?"

"There's a gate in the stockade on the east side. It's small and is always barred. That's the one, I think."

"It ain't your dad's fault, Lynn," Jim said. "It's—it's Slayt." He could not have stopped himself then had he chosen. His arms went around Lynn Dawson. His lips touched hers in a caress which carried all of the pent-up longing of his heart. And for that moment Lynn Dawson relaxed against him, signaling her love for him by the fervor of her acccceptance. Then she was gone. . . .

MIDNIGHT and the east gate! Lying under one of the freight wagons ranged along the wall, Lige Beeler touched Jim with a bony hand. "Comin', Jim."

A new sound had entered the thick quiet marred only by the muffled tread of sentries and the stirring of horses in the corral. From the corrals advanced a shape through the dark. It resolved itself into three men, sliding along stealthily, leading mounts.

Jim Carlyon picked out the short, burly man in the center. "Ready, Lige," he muttered, and slipped clear of the wagon, his gun in his hand.

Lige Beeler drew erect by his side. Jim Carlyon's mouth opened as he heard the rattle of bars on the gate. But he did not speak. Suddenly boots were coming at a wild stumbling run from the direction of the store. A voice cried hysterically, "Slayt! Take me along with you, Slayt! You promised. Take me along, Slayt, or I'll—!"

A curse ripped from Slayt's lips. "Swing it open!" he hissed. Dying firelight gleamed on a gun barrel. Too late Jim realized what he intended, and triggered swiftly. The two shots blared not an instant apart.

Slayt pitched down headlong, but not before the bullet he had let fly found its mark in Tom Dawson. With a sighing groan the trader fell.

Swift roaring confusion broke loose then. Men were shouting. Lanterns cut jerky arcs in the dark. The racket of voices and feet swelled through the enclosure.

Through the hours to dawn Jim sat

with Lynn Dawson by her father's bedside. Both knew that there was no hope for him.

As the first light began to shred the layers of night, Lige Beeler called Jim Carlyon to the walls. The Indians had massed again for the attack which was planned to carry them like leaping fire over the settlement. Every man who could stand was there to beat them off, as were women who had taken over the guns of the dead. Racing lines of the savages hurtled against the wooden pilings of the stockade. In the midst of the shrieking pandemonium Jim Carlyon emptied his gun mechanically, loaded and fired again. He grew numb to everything but the loophole before him, the hot barrel of his rifle, the whirling avalanche of naked, gleaming bodies. Again and again that avalanche was checked as it threatened to overwhelm the stockade. Again and again it came on, until for the last time, its ranks depleted and broken, it fell back in defeat. Jim Carlyon watched as the files of warriors straggled away, this time, apparently, for good.

Five hours had rolled by. Jim walked unsteadily to the trading store. Lynn met him there; there were powder marks staining the soft contours of her face. "Dad died," she said simply, "so I went out—to help."

Jim Carlyon took her roughly in his arms. "We're leavin' tomorrow, Lynn, you an' me. From now on we'll be together. Nothin' will ever separate us again." They sealed that bargain with their lips; then Jim said soberly. "'Fore we make plans we got to go to Pacific Springs. We're cleaned out an' I got to tell Ab."

AB CARLYON was propped in a chair in the office when Jim stepped through the door. With him was a stranger in gray coat and trousers.

Jim said awkwardly, "Dad, I got some talkin' to do if—"

"Not now, boy," rumbled old Ab. "I want you to meet Billy Elkins. Best friend I ever had. He was with me on the Wells Butterfield line."

Keen and friendly eyes studied Jim as he took the proffered hand. "Proud to meet Ab's son, Jim. You've heard what's happened?"

Jim shook his head.

"You were in part of it," Elkins told him. "Word came by telegraph this morning. Holliday took a bad beating all along the Overland—except for Bowdwin. Terrific losses which may throw him into bankruptcy. I've an idea—a very strong one—that he will be glad to sell out before the year's gone. Wells Fargo will do the buying."

At the puzzled look on Jim's face, Ab roared, "Wells Fargo, son! It's the old Wells Butterfield outfit, comin' back strong!"

"More than that," Elkins continued, "if we take over Holliday's line, we'll want the Carlyon Company too. You've made a reputation with your express business that Wells Fargo wants."

Jim Carlyon did not look up. "There's nothin' to buy," he said in a low voice. "The Carlyons are plumb busted."

Billy Elkins cleared his throat. "We know all about that, Jim. There are some things worth more than stock to Wells Fargo—guts, to be blunt. Not much money will change hands. But to build up and run this division we'll need a man—with guts. The job's yours if you'll take it, Jim."

Jim Carlyon looked at his father and saw that the old man's eyes were blurred with happiness. "I'll take it!" he said.

THE END

Up the Trail

THE TRAIL up from Texas was tough and hard. Wandering bands of Indians still swooped down from the hills and ran off whole herds of cattle. Many white men made huge profits by stampeding the trail herds into the hills and stealing the scattered cattle at their leisure. But the men who drove the herds were a hardy lot—ready for hell. Young Bill Steele was one of these.

He was bringing the big Lazy K herd up to Dodge City. He was in a hurry to deliver before the other outfits arrived and the price of beef dropped. He had to make it or the Lazy K would go under the auctioneer's hammer. But three weeks up the trail he ran right into the CT herd while it was watering at the Canadian.

The Lazy K had left many dry days behind it; and before anybody could do anything about it the two herds were all mixed in together. That, in itself, might have caused little concern. But the CT and Lazy K were neighbors down in Texas. For years strife had smoldered in the two outfits over range rights. . . .

Chuck Terry, owner of the CT looked up Bill Steele who was in the midst of trying to re-assemble his herd. Chuck's big hand was mighty close to gun-butt.

"It looks to me," he said, "as if you done this on purpose. Or are you goin' to tell me you didn't know we was ahead?"

For years Bill Steele had wanted to have it out with blustering Chuck Terry. But if they went for guns and Bill got hurt it was not on his own responsibility. His boss would suffer if he didn't get that herd to Dodge City. He had to swallow his pride and turn down the offer to fight.

"Someday," he said, "I'm goin' to knock your bull head off. But I'm too busy now. Get goin' yourself an' help us separate these herds!"

(Continued on page 159)

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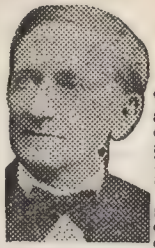

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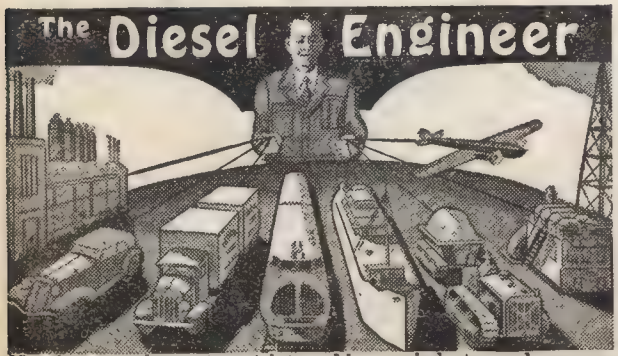

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American School, Dept. D-449, Drexel Avenue at 58th Street, Chicago, Illinois

(Continued from Page 157)

He turned his back on Terry
back to work. Terry stared
then, as if it was against his
to work himself. Those two,
the entire force of both crews,
the herds rolling north again.

They camped almost with
each other for days. The C
and the Lazy K wanted
looked like a deadlock un
stampeded in a thunder sto
the cattle were spread all
Chuck Terry was ready to

"If you'd held your herd
tered at Bill Steele.

Bill Steele sized him up
night he and all his men ha
cally to hold the herd bac
succeeded, and he was
that the trouble in the La
the whole stampede.
enough from Chuck Te
And this time he saw red.

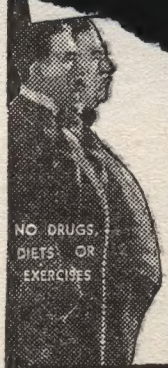
Fist to fist the two men
Bill had forgotten all about
sibility to the old man. Chuck
gotten everything except the nec
beating down this slighter but faste
They kept at it until neither of them
stand. Then, suddenly, the two men
dropped their bleeding fists.

"Damn it," Chuck Terry said, "a gent that fights like you wouldn't stampede his herd into another's. A gent who . . ."

"Fights like you," Bill finished, grinning painfully, "shouldn't go around getting hot under the collar. Now that grass down in Texas. . . ."

Chuck wouldn't listen to him. "Let's throw our herds together," he said. "We'll beat every other damn Tejano to Dodge."

They shook on that and, so wabbly they could hardly sit their horses, they got their crews together and started off to Dodge City in one great herd. The CT and the Lazy K got top prices that year —and for many a year after. They had learned the meaning of neighborliness. . . .



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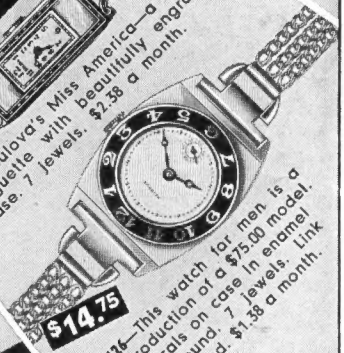

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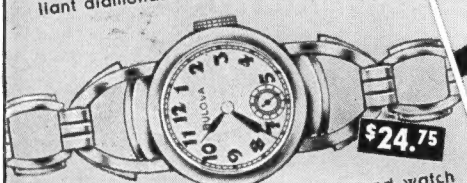

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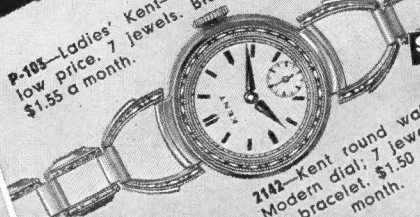

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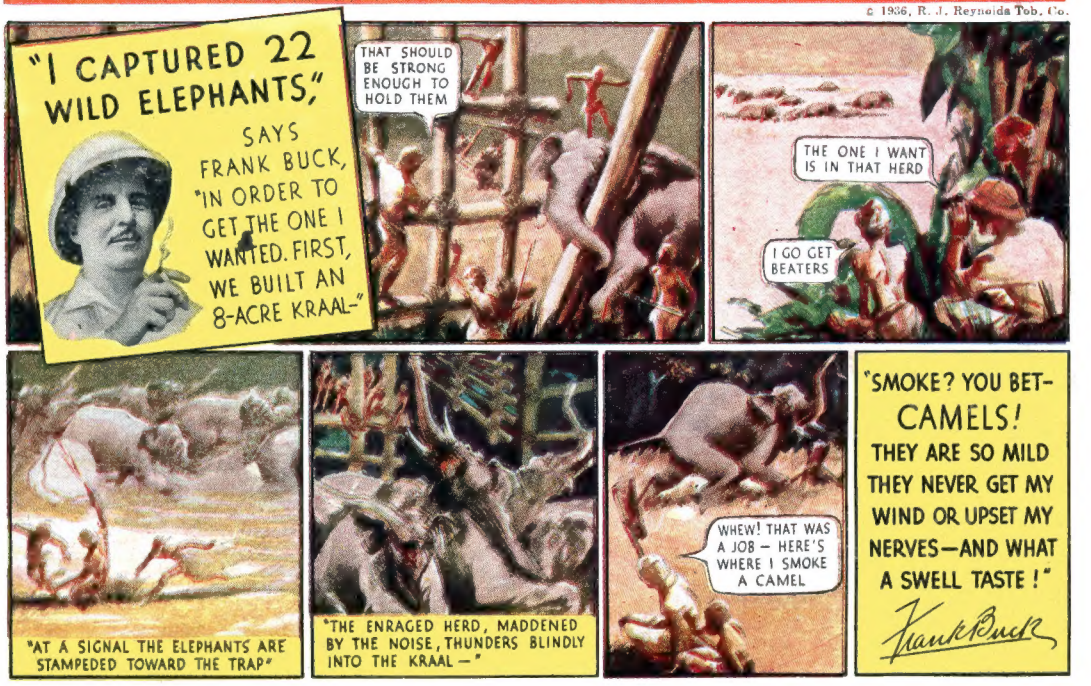
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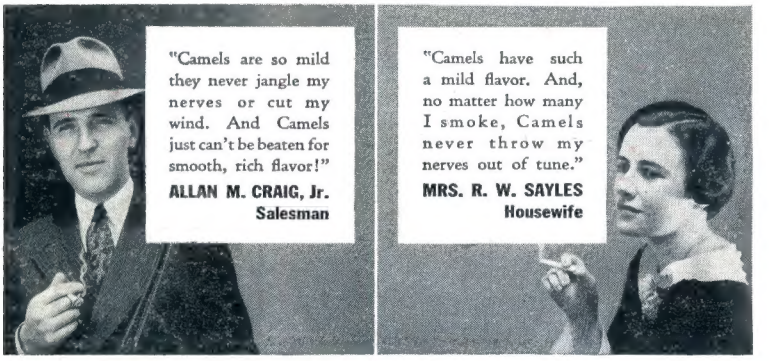
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